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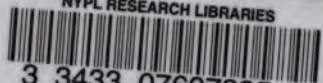
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FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

A NOVEL

BY

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*Author of "Southern Silhouettes," "Groundswells,"
"The Martlett Seal," "Uncle Scipio,"
etc., etc., etc.*



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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. Black Prince Brings a Stranger to Frogneck and a Surprise to One of its Inmates.....	7
II. Oscar Leighton Finds the Coil Tightening about Him.....	23
III. The Friendly Drummer Finds a Tell-tale Card in his Sample-bag.....	34
IV. Rebecca Leighton Makes a Discovery and an Accusation.....	48
V. Miss Schultz, "Modiste," Scents a Mystery....	58
VI. The Young Woman who "Scandalized" Miss Schultz Invades Good Society.....	71
VII. Miss Hinton Suffers from a Sprained Ankle and—Remorse.....	85
VIII. Cuthbert Offers Valuable Assistance to Becky under Trying Circumstances.....	101
IX. The Firm of Hinton, Cuthbert & Hinton Con- cludes to have a Dress Made by Miss Schultz.	117
X. Miss Schultz Develops a Vein of Mild Malice..	131
XI. Oscar Invades his Mother's Hermitage only to Find the Storm-signal Hoisted.....	145
XII. He also has an Agitating Interview with Miss Rittenhouse.....	161
XIII. Miss Hinton Concludes that the Success of the Expedition is Threatened by too much Leighton.....	176
XIV. Miss Hinton Takes Miss Rittenhouse Driving with rather Startling Results.....	190

CONTENTS

	PAGE
XV. The Lame Man Undertakes to Do a Little Business on His Own Account.....	205
XVI. Amy Spoils Miss Rittenhouse's Drive and a June Afternoon by Telling a Ghastly Story..	219
XVII. Olivia Leaves Frogneck with the Purpose of Telling Cuthbert a True Story.....	233
XVIII. Leslie Cuthbert Hears the Truth about His Cousin's Death.....	245
XIX. The Topsy Tinker and Dick Leighton Hold a Personal Interview in Old Nathan's Cabin..	258
XX. Contains the Story of a Tea-gown and a Happy Wooing.....	270

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

I

BLACK PRINCE BRINGS A STRANGER TO FROGNECK AND A SURPRISE TO ONE OF ITS INMATES

It was the sort of night to make one grateful for any kind of shelter and thankful for the privilege of staying at home, even in a hotel.

Among the civilized mitigations of the city, such as electric lights, cabs, good sidewalks, and well-defined crossings, it would have been called a nasty night. Among suburban surroundings, which bordered on wildness under the brightest of suns, it was nothing short of dismal.

A beating rain, mixed with substantial hailstones, fell mercilessly. Wherever a window-sash had been left unshuttered through carelessness, or been deprived of such protection by an exceptionally rude blast, the hailstones got in some destructive work.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

By the incessant play of lightning a broad expanse of open country was brought briefly into view for the discouragement of a man on horseback, who had been unwise enough to leave a comfortable hotel on the very eve of an uncomfortable storm. Friendly warnings had not been lacking. Taking off his steel-rimmed spectacles, the better to read the darkening heavens, his host of an hour had said:

"I reckon you ain't much of a cloud-reader, sir, or you wouldn't be so brash about settin' out on a eight-mile ride if it's a rod."

A friendly commercial traveller, who had reached the little town of Ponola by the same noon train, added his protest to the landlord's:

"If it's Frogneck you're bent on starting for in such thundering haste, take the advice of a man who has wrestled with Mississippi roads in fair weather and foul. True"—with a resounding slap on the landlord's broad shirt-back—"the Traveller's Rest and Jimmie Dale are good things to get away from, but there's a goodish stretch of ugly country between this and Frogneck. You'd better stay under shelter till them clouds roll by."

The gentle voice of the barefoot hostler, whose hue was blacker than the swift-scudding storm-clouds, was the last lifted in warning:



A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

"Less'n it's a mighty matter wid you, boss, to get to Frogneck to-night, I sholy would think twicet befo' startin'."

The traveller threw him a quarter, and vaulted into the saddle with a laughing taunt for all his advisers.

"You think more of a few drops of rain in this country than we do in mine." He rode gayly away, with scarcely a glance at the lowering heavens.

Before expressing an opinion the landlord of the Traveller's Rest slowly shifted from one cheek to the other the quid of tobacco which lent a touch of irregularity to the contour of his face:

"That man's a fool, if he did come from Chicago. Clouds like them may spit 'a few drops of rain' where he come from, but they mean business in this State."

"I am afraid he's in for it," said the drummer, expanding his jaws in a capacious yawn. A profitless afternoon stretched dully ahead of him, and he would have liked the Chicago man's companionship.

The hostler looked at his quarter and sighed. "I sho' do hate t' see ole Black Prince took out in the face of a storm; but that's a rale gentleman."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Then all the traveller's advisers dismissed him from mind and went about their own affairs, while the headstrong man fared towards Frogneck as fast as his respect for Black Prince's evident age and his own unfamiliarity with the country would permit.

To all inquiries made before starting he had received one answer. The landlord gave it:

"Frogneck gate's eight good miles from Ponola court-house door. There ain't no possibility of your goin' past the house. It sets square and solid as the rock o' Gibraltar, in the midst of its trees. After you pass through the big gate leadin' from the public road through the Frogneck place, the road sorter winds some, but you just give Black Prince the rein, and he'll fetch you smack-bang up to the front door. He used to belong to a Leighton—Wild Dick Leighton. He's dead and gone now, and the least said about dead folks the better. You'll just about make it by supper-time if nothing don't happen more'n now is."

But several things did happen more than then was.

Black Prince heaved such a fathomless sigh of content, after imbibing his fill at the clear-running creek he had to ford before reaching Frogneck's gate, that his saddle-girth, the most time-

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

honored item of his shabby outfit, gave way under the strain and had to be cobbled by clumsy fingers before further progress was possible. A wrong fork in the road, taken abstractedly in spite of Black Prince's mute protest, led away from, instead of towards, the gate in the Frogneck boundary fence, puzzling and retarding the wayfarer, until he wished he had been more docile under advice and stayed under shelter.

Night and the worst of the storm were upon him before he passed between the two tall stuccoed gate-posts, whose wide gate stood hospitably—or thriftlessly—open.

By the light of frequent flashes of lightning a glistening expanse of greensward and tall trees, stretching around him on all sides, were made visible.

Remembering the landlord's advice, he made no attempt to guide his horse through this undiscovered country. Of his own volition Black Prince trotted sullenly forward with down-dropped head, now plunging laboriously through stiff clinging mud, now sending little spurts of yellow water far above his rider's knees as he splashed through an improvised lakelet in the clay road.

The tall grasses that fringed the roadside bent

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

their heads before the resistless pressure of rain and wind. The sighing of the pines, as they tossed their storm-lashed arms far above horse and rider, added a last touch of melancholy to the dying day.

One of these lightning impressions showed a group of fine cattle dejectedly huddled about the trunk of a mighty sycamore. Another gave to sight, for a fleeting moment only, the black square bulk of a very large turreted house, set in the midst of clustering shrubs and evergreens. A wild riot of swaying branches and bending stems emphasized its immovability.

From out this elemental confusion a small point of light was presently evolved. It shone with the fitful uncertainty that marked all things that night; now visible for a few hopeful seconds, now totally extinguished. Towards it, with a will of his own which Black Prince acquiesced in, the rider rode, careless whether he should bring up in a palace or a hut.

Their progress seemed reasonably satisfactory until, without other premonition than a terrified snort, Black Prince swerved so violently that it was only by clutching his long mane his rider retained the saddle. Having executed a waltz around himself several times, the trem-

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

bling brute came to a dead halt, refusing obstinately either to go forward or backward.

At this moment of inaction an unusually vivid flash of lightning forked its way across the black skies.

“The devil and—”

There was no time to call for “Tom Walker,” for, with a sudden change of policy, Black Prince plunged forward, with his jaws hard set against the sawing of rein and bit, intent, apparently, upon putting as much space as possible between him and the cause of his terror.

Onward they dashed, the man carrying with him a fresh storm-photograph, somewhat fantastically blurred, but real in all essentials:

A gigantic rain-blackened Florida oak, with a low sweep of mighty branches; the slight figure of a man clad in the coolest and scantiest of summer house-wear, a pair of calmly folded arms, a bared head, and a pair of eyes black as the storm upon which they looked, bright enough in their burning gaze to have launched the forked lightnings which revealed them.

Pondering this strange infusion of the human element into his lonely ride, the Chicago man drew Black Prince back upon his haunches and turned him resolutely about. He had come to a conclusion:

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Some young fellow overtaken on his way home from football or tennis. If this brute will carry double, I'll offer him a lift."

But Black Prince's carrying capacity was not to be put to the test that night. The spot was regained. The horse testified to it by a series of indignant snorts. The rain-blackened trunk and low-sweeping branches of the Florida oak bore mute witness, but no man was there—nothing to indicate that mortal had ever sought shelter under its dense foliage.

Once more the Chicago man said, "The devil!" and once more Black Prince turned his nose in the direction of that point of light. It had disappeared as completely as the man in the white duck trousers and fluttering neck-scarf.

"I believe I've ridden into a witch's headquarters. Confound the whole business!"

The man settled himself more firmly in his saddle and resigned himself to be taken whithersoever his horse willed. He was not a coward, but the vanishment of that light added materially to his discomfort.

He would have felt a degree less mystified if he could have known that a woman had deprived him of his beacon-light by simply ordering the closing of one more shutter in the big front of the Frogneck house.

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

From a table in the Frogneck sitting-room a lamp had been lending a point of light to the storm-drenched landscape.

By token of the tall glass-doored bookcases which lined three sides of its wall, by a handsome old-fashioned mahogany desk, and several marble busts, yellowed by time and chipped by collapses of untrustworthy pedestals, that lamp-lighted room was entitled to be called a library; but by token of a sewing-machine in one of its windows, a stack of guns in one of its corners, and a miscellany of toys, work-baskets, and sun-hats on the piano, it was emphatically the family sitting-room.

Four members of the Frogneck household were collected about the lamp. It was set on a solid old-fashioned marble-topped table of the unmovable pattern. Having been once inexorably planted in the exact centre of the exactly square room, nothing but a consuming conflagration would ever warrant its displacement.

The rays of the lamp it supported fell upon four striking faces, none of them as yet advanced to middle life. It also disclosed the fact that a game of whist was progressing somewhat hysterically.

A concerted attempt to politely ignore the raging of the elements met with disastrous de-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

feat. Simultaneously with the flash that sent Black Prince quivering away from the Florida oak, the window to the Frogneck library blazed with lurid brilliance.

Two of the whist-players flung away their cards and clasped sheltering hands over their dazzled eyes. Faint screams escaped their white lips. The other two laughed with a somewhat shallow assumption of indifference. Of course, the two who screamed were women; the two who laughed insincerely were men.

The game was declared off. Said the head of the Frogneck household:

"With Becky screaming as if she saw a regiment of mice, and Miss Rittenhouse as pale as a winding-sheet, we may as well put up the cards."

No one dissented and no one obeyed.

She who had been rebuked for screaming turned a pitifully white face towards her rebuker.

"Oh, Oscar, it was just such a night as this that—"

"Hold your tongue, Becky," said the head of the family, transfixing the trembling girl with a look.

The other woman made a polite attempt to better matters.

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

"I don't wonder that your sister's nerves feel the strain of this awful storm. My own hardened ones are not proof against it. Couldn't we have that window-shutter closed, Mr. Leighton? That last flash was actually blinding."

The head of the house went to do her bidding with a docility he exercised towards no one else. The sash was heavy, and the clumsy iron catch which held the shutter against the wall was refractory. The struggle was somewhat protracted. In the long-run Oscar Leighton was very apt to conquer anything or any one that opposed him. The shutter yielded, and the Chicago man was left to unbroken gloom.

Leighton walked back towards the whist-table, wiping the moisture from his head. His hair was as black as an Indian's, and his eyes corresponded with it. He looked distinctly disturbed as he joined the group about the table.

"Satan himself is turned loose to-night, or the lightning played me a malicious trick just now."

He laughed nervously and dropped into his place opposite Miss Rittenhouse. Then he snapped at his younger brother:

"Deal me a hand, Ted, and stop staring like the unmannerly cub you are."

Ted was the youngest player at the table; he

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

was also the youngest adult member of the Leighton family. Oscar, as his senior and the head of the house since the recent death of their father, was entitled to "put on a few airs" without incurring frowns.

After a fashion he had been Oscar's fag all his days; also, after the abject custom of fags, he exulted in the mental superiority and superb dark beauty of his tyrant. Unresentfully, he did Oscar's bidding, taking surprised note of the pallor that had overspread his brother's face.

"What did you see, Oscar?"

"Black Prince galloping like mad around the curves by the camellia-bushes."

"Not Dick's old beast?"

"None other."

"You are an idiot, Oscar; it can't be."

Oscar made a gesture of impatience.

"Hold your tongue and listen."

Teddy held his tongue, and everybody else listened. The Frogneck house was furnished with a paved porte-cochère. Upon the bricks of this sheltered approach the pounding of a horse's hoofs was distinctly audible.

Ted laughed mirthlessly and pushed his chair back from the table.

"It will go hard with a stranger to find that old knocker in the dark. Jeems's River!"

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

Teddy's surprise culminated in that innocent bit of profanity. Even as he was proclaiming its inaccessibility, the old brass knocker sent its imperative summons clamoring through the great high-ceiled hall.

Oscar looked at Teddy. Teddy looked at Oscar. Both muttered something under their breath; they left the room together.

Miss Rittenhouse fingered the bangs about her temples with the instinctive vanity of a handsome woman used to admiration. A long gilt-framed mirror panelled the space between the two front windows. She frankly consulted it as to the condition of her neck-wear:

"One ought to be thankful for any sort of interruption to a family party on such a night as this. Personally, I am ready to welcome anybody from a ghost to a pickpocket."

Becky laughed hysterically:

"Nothing but a ghost would dare venture abroad on such a night."

The library windows overlooked the portecochère. Black Prince evinced his pleasure at reaching its welcome shelter by a whinny of delighted recognition. Becky started violently as his shrill voice pierced the air.

"Even that brings back that terrible night."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Some of these days," said Miss Rittenhouse, almost commandingly, "you are going to give me the story of that night. I perceive that any allusion to it disturbs the whole household, and as I am a member of it now, I am included in the disturbance."

"Oh, if I only might !"

"You not only may, but must. You perhaps see in me only the result of your brother's advertisement for a teacher and companion."

"I see in you the loveliest and dearest of friends."

Miss Rittenhouse passed this girlish interruption by with an indulgent smile. "But I have an inconvenient trick of identifying myself with the people I am closely thrown with, of growing fond of them when practicable, and the sorrows and troubles of Frogneck must in a measure envelop me so long as I am under its roof."

Just then Oscar came back alone. To Becky's trained eye fresh trouble-furrows were visible on his forehead. He looked at neither of the women as he spoke, but busied himself gathering up the scattered cards.

"It is a man to see me on a troublesome piece of business. I may be kept up late. Ted has taken him up-stairs to get into some dry clothes.

A STRANGER AND A SURPRISE

I should like to have some food set out in the dining-room and a bed made ready."

It was as if he laid his commands on both of them. Considering themselves dismissed, the two women left the room together. In transit Becky stopped long enough to print a good-night kiss on her brother's cheek and to whisper an anxious question: "Oh, Oscar, is it anything about the mortgage?"

"Yes."

"Don't sit up late. You know it always makes your head ache. Let the business wait until morning."

"He wants to catch the early morning train for New Orleans. I sha'n't care to keep him."

And with an unpleasant laugh he held the sitting-room door open for the women to pass through.

On the rack in the hall a wet derby hat had been thrown on its crown. With a general comment on the thriftlessness of men, Miss Rittenhouse lifted it to hang it on a peg.

From its crown a name, embroidered in gilt letters on a red satin hat-band, stared at her:

"Frederic Bartlett, Chicago, Ill."

Becky read it aloud over her shoulder. Miss Rittenhouse hung the hat on a peg and turned

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

towards the dining-room at the end of the big hall.

Depressed by her knowledge of the man's errand, Becky had no attention to bestow upon her companion. The gloom of the night enwrapped them both. They did Oscar's bidding perfunctorily, and then mounted the stairs leading to their bedrooms.

II

OSCAR LEIGHTON FINDS THE COIL TIGHTENING ABOUT HIM

STOPPING at her own bedroom door, with her hand on its knob, Miss Rittenhouse turned pleading eyes on Rebecca:

"Such a night as this puts one out of conceit with one's own company. Come sit with me, child, until sleep overcomes you."

And Rebecca said, "Gladly."

Above the small bedroom lamp she carried, the older woman's face showed pitifully white; the hand with which she clutched the door-knob, almost as if seeking support, trembled visibly. On the strength of these manifest signs of weakness Becky waxed patronizing:

"I had no idea, my dear, you were such a bundle of nerves," she said, with a superior air, as she curled herself up luxuriously in a big arm-chair. "Now, since I was called on to set out food for that wretch who has, I suppose, come

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

to claim the very roof over our heads, I have forgotten all about the storm. Besides, it is almost spent."

Miss Rittenhouse echoed her closing words with a heavy sigh, and, walking across the big room, placed the lamp she carried on the mantel-piece.

"Almost spent; but what a night this has been !"

Becky's bright eyes roved freely over the large room.

"You have not gotten used to our semi-tropical ways yet. Instead of praying, 'Now I lay me down to sleep,' I always pray, 'From sudden death, good Lord, deliver us.'"

"Child, you sound shockingly flippant."

"Do I? I am afraid I do. I beg pardon for it. This room is lots prettier since you came to live in it. You have given it so many decorative touches. Oscar says you beautify everything you touch."

Miss Rittenhouse received this tribute unsmilingly. "Mr. Leighton is entirely too complimentary."

"Not in general. Personally I have nothing to complain of on that score. But I think he is right about you. You don't know what a handsome picture you make right now."

THE COIL TIGHTENING

Miss Rittenhouse had lighted a larger lamp on the centre-table and seated herself near it. Its shade of rose-colored silk, quilled and lace-edged, lent a touch of pink to her white cheeks, and softened the hard-set corners of her mouth.

"That table looks just like you," said Becky. Miss Rittenhouse smiled.

"Then I must look like a dreadfully disorderly person."

"No, only artistic—not cut-and-dried."

The table was littered with an indiscriminate collection. "Consuelo," in the original, lay flattened under a well-worn French dictionary. A volume of "Fors Clavigera" had been flung down open, with a long spray of lemon-scented verberna keeping place; a globe-shaped cut-glass rose-jar held a bunch of fading crimson roses which dropped their petals on a square of fine linen stretched in embroidery-hoops; upon the linen a branch of maidenhair fern had attained a fair silken growth in shaded greens. Some open letters and a silver basket of purple grapes completed the collection.

Miss Rittenhouse took up the embroidery-frame, and cast about in the confusion for her thimble. Becky eyed her resentfully.

"You are not going to start work at this hour of the night? By the way, didn't you say I might

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

call you Miss Olivia ? Rittenhouse is so dreadfully long."

Miss Rittenhouse pointed her needle at the mantel-shelf clock, a Dresden trifle noted for unreliability.

"It is not quite nine o'clock yet. Call me Olivia by all means, if you choose, dear. Moreover, this does not deserve to be dignified as 'work.' It is simply something to keep my fingers occupied while I lend you my ears."

"Thanks, but I don't want your ears."

"Yes, I think you do. Isn't this as good a time as any to tell me the story of Black Prince ?"

"Oh, if it's only Black Prince's story you ask for, I can give you that in a very few words."

Becky came over to the table and stood there occupying her own fingers with the destruction of the sprig of fragrant verbena.

"Black Prince belonged to my brother Richard. We used to say that Dick loved him better than he did father, mother, sister, or brothers. Dick came in between Oscar and Teddy. He was the handsomest, brightest, darlingest Leighton of them all. Poor old Dick ! But—but—"

Olivia filled up a sobful pause:

"And he died ?"

THE COIL TIGHTENING

Becky made a gesture of impatience that sent "Fors Clavigera" spinning across the table:

"Teddy says papa was too strict with Dick; didn't give him time enough to sow any wild oats. Papa was strict with all of us. But some natures can submit, others can't. Dick got into some sort of trouble, I don't exactly know what. Of course it was never talked of before me. Papa put him away from all of us, on a miserable little plantation back in the swamp. I was never there, but Teddy says it was bad enough to make a murderer out of an angel. And then—then—one night—oh, I wish I could forget the sound, but I never will—we heard Black Prince neighing under the porte-cochère, just as we did to-night. Oscar and Teddy went to the door together, just as they did to-night. Black Prince neighed all the time. They found him standing at the foot of the steps. There was no one in the saddle. I have never seen Dick since, nor am I permitted to ask any questions about him. I loved him so dearly. He used to call me his little chum. He never told me to hold my tongue. You heard Oscar do it to-night."

"Yes, but it was the only rude thing I ever heard him say. He was very much wrought up."

Becky dismissed him with a toss of her pretty

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

head. "Oh, Oscar can be just horrid to me. You know I am to go to the Boston Conservatory of Music if the crop turns out well. I want to start right after Christmas. That is why Oscar advertised for a companion for mamma and a teacher for Mellicent. You see how poor mamma is. She has been just that way ever since—since—that night."

"She is very docile."

"Oh, very, and adores you. But, as you know, Olivia dear—you said I might call you that—we all think you entirely too nice for the place. Oscar says he feels as if an empress had condescended to us."

Miss Rittenhouse opposed a tragic face to this levity:

"Which only goes to show that even Mr. Oscar Leighton can sometimes make very silly speeches. But was Black Prince sold out of the family?"

"Oh, my, yes. None of us ever wanted to see him after that night. He was bought by a tavern-keeper out at Ponola. Now I have told you all there is to the Frogneck mystery—at least all that I know myself."

"Not quite all."

"No?"

"Mellicent."

THE COIL TIGHTENING

Becky suddenly remembered that she was a Leighton of Frogneck, and that Miss Rittenhouse was a salaried alien.

"Is—Mellicent," she said stiffly. Adding a yet stiffer "good-night," she rose to retire to her own room.

Miss Rittenhouse smiled at the sudden assumption of dignity which sat so comically on the child Becky, but she returned her formal good-night in kindness.

"Some of these days, my dear, you will trust me farther, because you will know me better."

"Perhaps until then I had better take Oscar's advice and 'hold my tongue.'"

When Miss Rittenhouse was left entirely alone she flung aside all pretence of industry, locked the door behind Rebecca, and extinguished both lamps. Upon the black obscurity of the room a moan escaped.

"Pitiful Father, where may I find peace?"

She flung herself prone upon the hearth-rug, with her face grovelling earthward. Her arms were stretched above her head, with hands rigidly clasped. She lay there as motionless as a carven image, taking no note of time.

The clock on the mantel-shelf struck ten, eleven, twelve. From the library beneath, the subdued murmur of voices came to her ears,

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

now in a hoarse monologue, again in concert, not altogether amicable.

With a sigh of spent vitality she finally lifted herself from the rug and stood with her hands dropped before her. Then she walked over to one of the large front windows and flung up its sash.

The storm had given way to a solemn hush. A thousand fireflies gemmed the dark wet leaves of the camellia-bushes that outlined the winding carriage-drive. They looked like bright earthly counterparts to the stars which had come out overhead. A pungent smell of wet earth greeted her nostrils. Rank odors from the thick shrubbery mingled with it.

Flinging herself on her knees, she bared her neck and bosom to the heavy night air.

"Oh, if it would only kill, and kill quickly ! They call it so deadly, this dreadful swamp night air, but to me it has brought only soothing until to-night—oh, until this dreadful, terrible night !"

She beat her small hands together passionately. "Such a small world, such a treacherous world ! Too small, too spiteful, to grant refuge to a tired woman. So tired, dear Lord, so tired !"

The murmur of voices in the sitting-room

THE COIL TIGHTENING

ceased. She could hear some one mount the steps and pass along the corridor towards the guest-chamber she had helped Becky make ready: a quick, heavy footfall, as of a man who placed a fixed value upon every moment of his time, whether it fell before sunrise or after midnight.

As it passed her door, Olivia buried her head in her hands upon the window-sill and shuddered. Her attitude was one of prayer. Did she pray ?

Presently she lifted her head, but did not rise from her knees. From where she knelt, by the slightest forward movement of her body, she could look down upon the carriage-drive. The steady crunching of its gravel under boot-heels caught her ear. Protected by the darkness, she leaned forward.

The gleam of a lighted cigar revealed the whereabouts of the late promenader. Slowly, monotonously, untiringly, the smoker tramped and smoked. At intervals a spray of falling sparks showed where a cigar had been thrown down, only to make way for its successor. Once the faint explosion of a match in contact with a pillar of the porte-cochère drew her gaze downward. By its momentary illumination Oscar's pallid face was brought into view.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

She caught her breath and shrank farther back into the darkened room.

"I thought so. I thought so. But why should it disturb him so profoundly? What is it to him?"

The man below resumed his monotonous promenade. Time crept across the dial of the clock unnoted. Then something startled him, and, flinging away his cigar, he walked rapidly away in the direction of the dark cluster of roofs and sheds called by courtesy "the stables."

She, too, heard the noise that had startled Leighton, and held her breath in frightened anticipation. But nothing happened to satisfy her curiosity.

It was a single pistol-shot, distant but distinct.

The eastern sky grew pallid with the gray light of day before she flung herself, half undressed, upon her bed. Sitting on the bed-edge to twist her heavy hair into a tighter coil, she planned for an early awakening.

If she had kept watch at the window a little longer she might have been enlightened, or perhaps still further mystified. She might have seen Oscar Leighton come back from the direction of the stables, walking with the heaviness of a man mentally and physically exhausted, let himself into the dark house and disappear.

THE COIL TIGHTENING

A few moments longer still and she might have seen Black Prince walk sedately into view, treading the rain-soaked earth as if he purposely muffled his own hoof-beats. In the saddle sat a man dressed in the lightest of southern summer wear.

But of all this she saw nothing, because her lids, heavy with weeping, had closed finally over her tired eyes.

Nor did the Chicago man see or hear, for, whistling as he undressed, he only tarried long enough to make a short entry in his diary before climbing into the high-piled, inviting bed in his big room.

Not even Oscar was awake when Black Prince passed the door, for, climbing wearily up to his chamber in the turret, he had fallen asleep almost immediately.

III

THE FRIENDLY DRUMMER FINDS A TELL-TALE CARD IN HIS SAMPLE-BAG

HAVING traversed half the State in the conscientious endeavor to impress all rural dealers with the superiority of his particular brand of cigars over everybody else's, the friendly drummer once more flung his sample-bag on the desk in the dingy little office of the Traveller's Rest, and expressed his extreme satisfaction at once more crossing palms with his dear friend Jimmie Dale.

Nothing could exceed his satisfaction at seeing Jimmie Dale, unless it was Jimmie Dale's satisfaction at seeing him.

So solicitous was the landlord about his guest's comfort that, despite his two hundred pounds of solid flesh, he carried the sample-bag up-stairs himself, and pottered about his best spare room to see that water, towels, and soap were in evidence.

There is no better reader of countenances or judge of human nature to be found anywhere

A TELL-TALE CARD

than your commercial traveller. Jimmie Dale's drummer was no exception to this rule. Throwing a very dusty collar upon the dressing-table, he turned to the landlord with his big jolly laugh:

"Out with it, Jimmie. There's something more on your mind than soap and towels."

"Your supper," said the landlord evasively.

"If my supper sets as heavy on my stomach as something is setting on your mind, I'm booked for a first-class nightmare."

"Something is disagreeing with me, that's a fact," said the landlord; "and since you're so sharp-witted, I might as well out with it. Sure enough I meant to have waited until you had your supper."

"Then I'm mixed up in it, am I?"

"Well, no, not just exactly; and yet, in a sorter fashion, yes."

"As clear as this water," said the friendly drummer, plunging his big head into the little basin. When he emerged the landlord was gazing pensively at a newspaper he had taken from his pocket and spread open on the table before him.

"Have you seen this?" he asked.

Towel in hand, the traveller walked over to the table and looked down at the paper.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Chicago Herald, August 2d. And this is September 5th. You're quite up to date, Jimmie."

Jimmie waxed snappish under this taunt.

"Tain't a question of my up-to-dateness. I asked you if you'd seen this paper. I've been holding on to it for near a month. A fellow left it here about two weeks after you left, and it's set me to doin' some right hard thinking."

"Newspapers aim at saving people that trouble."

"Oh, stop your foolin', Messinger, and read that."

The landlord planted a dingy forefinger over a paragraph about which he had drawn wavering ink-lines.

The drummer mastered its contents with the rapidity of a man accustomed to read as he ran.

"Well, I can pick you out a paragraph to match that in nine newspapers out of every ten of any date. It isn't only Chicago men who have a trick of disappearing mysteriously."

"Yes, but read it again. Read it slowly and aloud. Then if something don't strike you all of a heap, you can take my head for a football."

"Thanks, but wooden footballs have gone out." The jolly drummer cleared his throat after that bit of chaff and complied:

A TELL-TALE CARD

“ ‘Wanted : Information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Frederic S. Bartlett, of No. 1309 Blaque Ave., this city. Mr. Bartlett left Chicago for a business trip to Memphis and other points in the South, on the first day of July, expecting to be gone less than two weeks. As important legal business was awaiting him on his return, his prolonged and unexplained absence is causing his friends and family extreme anxiety. Mr. Bartlett is ranked among the most successful attorneys and counsellors at law in this city.’ ”

“ Well,” said the drummer, “ what of it ? ”

The landlord pulled a bulky package of papers from his coat-pocket and rapidly loosened the string wrapped about them:

“ And this—and this—and this.”

“ Oh, come off ! Do you suppose I am going to sit down, on an empty stomach, to read about the disappearance of a man I never heard of, never saw, wouldn’t know from Julius Cæsar if he was to walk right in at that door this minute ? ”

“ Which he ain’t at all likely to do, poor chap.”

“ But what have you got to do with it, Dale ? Did he disappear on your hands ? ”

“ Now you begin to catch on. Here’s one

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

issue, August 10th, in which a clean thousand dollars is offered for information of the man."

"That's a tidy little lump if you could only earn it honestly."

The landlord, with both elbows planted on the table and his fat palms supporting his fat chin, reread the paragraph offering the coveted reward.

"You see, it pointedly asks for information. I ain't called on to produce the man."

"That's comfortable. But how are you going to produce the information?"

"That's what I've been studyin' on for a month. You see them paragraphs have been running more'n a month."

"Yes, I see."

"And I've been gettin' tolerable impatient for you to get back."

"Me?" asked the traveller in ungrammatical astonishment.

"Yes. I reckon if you can't help me to that thousand dollars, my chances are slim."

"It's more likely I'll help myself to it, Jimmie, if it comes in my way."

"We'll go halves if we secure it."

"That's reasonable. But what under the canopy have I got to do with it?"

"Do you remember a man that came in with

A TELL-TALE CARD

you on the noon train the last time you passed through Ponola ? ”

“ The fellow that rode away so jauntily in the face of the big storm ? ”

“ Exactly.”

“ Well, yes, I remember him. A handsome fellow, quick-spoken, quick walker, quick thinker. What about him ? ”

“ I ain’t never set eyes on him since he rode away from that horse-block that day on Black Prince.”

“ Well, what of that ? Some of these days I’ll pass through Ponola and find that I can get back to the pale of civilization without retaking your confounded mud or dust, and then you’ll never set eyes on me again.”

“ Maybe not. But I ain’t ever seen that horse again either.”

“ You don’t mean to say that he turned out to be a horse-thief ? ”

“ No. The horse was killed.”

“ Killed ? Pity. I recollect the horse better than I do the man. A handsome black brute, wasn’t he ? ”

Landlord Dale’s crest fell.

“ You’re disappointing me mightily, Messenger. I thought maybe you could give me the man’s name. Yes, it was a black horse; we’ll

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

talk about him later on. You see that man didn't stop here more'n just long enough to have a horse saddled and to drink a cup of coffee, so his name didn't go down on my books."

"And you are hoping he may turn up murdered?"

"I ain't hoping no such a thing. But if his name should happen to a-been Bartlett, and I, or ruther me and you, should happen to a-been the last folks who had speech of him, it might mean five hundred apiece to us."

"Precisely."

"But if you can't furnish his name, I can't furnish the information. I thought travelling gents were always handing out their cards."

"That's business."

"And taking other gents' cards in exchange."

"To chuck out of window at first chance."

"And it'll just be my luck for you t' have chucked that identical card out of window."

"I haven't said yet I ever saw the man's card. Why, I may have. After I've had my supper I'll look over a lot of rubbish in the bottom of my sample-bag. I emptied my pockets into it a week ago."

By this time the jolly drummer, having restored his handsome person to its accustomed

A TELL-TALE CARD

neatness, declared himself ready for a good square meal.

Having rapidly eaten his way to the cheese-and-cracker stage of his heavy supper, with Landlord Dale in personal attendance, the traveller said hastily:

"Now, then, to resume the tragedy of the storm-defier. What have you caught on to?"

"Just this. But"—here the landlord glanced suspiciously at the green baize door that led towards the tavern kitchen—"I've got a nigger in there that would cut off his right arm to serve Oscar Leighton. Let's discuss this matter behind closed doors."

"What has Leighton got to do with it?" Messinger asked, throwing himself on the lounge in his own room, and lighting one of his own brand.

"Just this: Late in the afternoon of the day after that storm, I got a note from Mr. Oscar Leighton enclosing his check for one hundred and thirty dollars."

"Well?"

"He said he had 'heard that I put that price on the horse, and as, through the carelessness of a stupid hostler, the horse had been ridden into the creek to water at a place where the banks were slippery and treacherous, he had

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

broken both fore legs, and he, Leighton, had been compelled to shoot him.' He added: 'If the amount enclosed did not cover my own estimate of the value of the horse, I would please let him know.'"

"That was clever."

"Oh, Leighton always acts the gentleman. I've got his note somewhere. I'm keepin' it. But you perceive there warn't a word in it about the fellow that rode Black Prince to Frogneck."

"He couldn't very well send you a check for him."

"Oh, quit your foolin', Messinger. There's more behind this than appears on the surface. He mout have said—"

"That it was none of your business. If I remember rightly, that Chicago fellow looked like a man who had cut his eye-teeth. Frogneck is just half way between Chizenhurst and Ponola. He could get away from Frogneck as easy one way as the other, perhaps easier, and, with no horse to return to you, doubtless he left the country by the Chizenhurst road."

"All of which I took the liberty of thinking up on my own hook. There's just one argyment against that theory, but that's a good one."

"Yes?"

"He left a spick-span silk-lined drab-colored

A TELL-TALE CARD

top-coat behind. Said it had been in his way ever since he started. Asked me to take care of it till he got back."

"One for the prosecution. But what is your theory?"

"I can't exactly say I've got a theory. I'm sorter dazed what to think."

"Well, then, confound it all, Dale, try to think a possible thing. If I've learned the geography of this section right, Frogneck lies in a country where men are classed as civilized. And if I've got hold of local annals right, there ain't a family in the county entitled to hold its head any higher than the Leightons."

"That used to be gospel truth."

"Used to be?"

"Yes. The Frogneck people have been under something of a shadder ever since Dick Leighton got into that muss with old man Jake Dingley's daughter."

"Not old Jake Dingley, the tinsmith, that used to go about with a soldering-pot and irons, mending pots and pans?"

"The very same. And I reckon the soldering-pot had something to do with it—took Jake away from home so much, and give Dick his chance."

"To ruin the girl?"

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"He never ruined the girl. He married her square and honest. That's what made his folks cut up so rough. And then when that Philadelphia girl was expected out, the rich one that they had been calculating on Dick's marrying and so saving the property, he had to own up."

Messenger sat up on the lounge where he had been stretched while smoking, and turned bright eyes on Jimmie Dale.

"It's getting interesting. Jimmy, you're a romancer."

"I'm telling gospel truth," said Jimmie ; "truth so stale that if you'd had this territory five years ago, you'd 'a' heard the story in every man's mouth. You see, old Mrs. Leighton she's a high-stepper. Some say she's got Indian blood in her—she's black enough. I say she's got a devil in her."

"The day after Dick owned up—that's what folks say who pretend to be posted—the old lady went to see Jake Dingley. Old man Leighton had been dead about a month. Richard, afraid to face the music, had gone to New Orleans, and wrote the truth back home; and before Dick got back the old man and the girl was gone."

"Where to ?"

A TELL-TALE CARD

"The Lord only knows."

"You're not idiot enough to suppose the Leightons made away with them?"

"I'm just idiot enough to suppose that anything or anybody that got in the way of old Madam Leighton's plans was going to come to grief."

"What became of Dick?"

"That's the kernel of the mystery. He came back from New Orleans, for I saw him myself, tearing over the country on Black Prince, looking more like a madman than like the jolly, handsome, laughing Dick Leighton everybody liked, because he didn't put on any Leighton airs. About a month after old Jake and his girl went away, Oscar Leighton rode Black Prince up to my door and offered him to me for such a small price, I'd 'a' been a fool not to have paid it. He said his brother had gone away, and no one else cared for the horse. At that time Teddy, the youngest boy, was away at school. The girl had just come home. As I told you, old man Leighton died just about that time, and there ain't been much sociability in the old house since. It used to be one of the gay places of the county. They used to stand at the head of the list. But after the old man died they say Oscar put a heavy mortgage on the place. Lord

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

knows what for, for they live like oysters down there."

"All of which," said Messinger, throwing his burnt-out cigar into the grate, "goes to prove that a man from Chicago having business with Mr. Oscar Leighton rides out to his residence and is gobbled up after the fashion of Blue-beard's wives."

"It don't go to prove nothing," said Dale petulantly, "exceptin' that I should like to find out, if possible, the name of the man who rode Black Prince away from my front door on the first day of last July."

In answer the drummer emptied his sample-bag on the table. From out the rubbish it contained he presently fished a dusty and crumpled card, small and engraved with a nice regard for the current vogue of men's visiting-cards. He flung it across the table to Dale:

"There you are."

Dale seized and scanned it eagerly.

"'Frederic S. Bartlett, Chicago, Ill.' By George! what do you think now, Mr. Messinger?"

"I don't know what to think," said the friendly drummer.

Landlord Dale gathered up the scattered newspapers and tied the string about them se-

A TELL-TALE CARD

curely. Indirectly they bore on that coveted reward.

“ I’ll just write direct to this ’ere paper, telling them of how and when their man passed through Ponola, and they can do the rest.”

“ Precisely,” said Messinger dryly; “ you can trust them to do the rest.”

IV

REBECCA LEIGHTON MAKES A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

At almost the same moment, amid the soberly handsome surroundings of the Frogneck sitting-room, Messinger's admission of perplexity was sadly echoed by Rebecca Leighton.

She and Oscar were alone in the room. Her eyes were red from weeping, his shadowy with gloom. Both wore an air of weariness bordering on exhaustion. A long and stormy discussion had filled up their evening. Becky broke a short interval of troubled silence with a despairing exclamation:

"Everything looks so hideously black. I don't know what to think."

"Poor child, I cannot help you. I am grieved."

"For me? For me, Oscar? Rather for yourself. For the head of the house of Leighton, who cannot look his sister in the face. For the brother whom I have honored and loved

A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

above every created being and whom I cannot now endure. Endure ! Think of it, Oscar ! I am about to leave my home because I cannot, will not, live in it with you."

She flung out her hands with a passionate gesture, and left her chair to pace the room restlessly. Inaction was no longer possible.

"Doesn't that sound monstrous, Oscar ?"

"It is monstrous," he answered wearily.

Suddenly she flung herself upon her knees before him, and drew into her own the hands that had been supporting his head.

"See, Oscar, how I humble myself. I kneel to you with a prayer on my lips. Give me back my faith in my brother. Mend the broken tie between us. You can do it. No one else can. You can do it by telling me the truth, the whole truth. Don't be afraid to trust me. I am your sister. I am a Leighton—and—and—oh, my brother, if the truth falls short of my hideous suspicions, a lifetime will be too short for me to repair the wrong I have done you in my heart !"

He lifted her to her feet, and, retaining forcible possession of her cold and trembling hands, fixed a stern gaze on her pale young face.

"You are a mere child, Rebecca, in point of years, but you are displaying the obstinacy and the arrogance that have been the bane of this

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

unfortunate family since the day it was founded. Do you abide by your declaration that unless I can satisfactorily account for that man's disappearance you refuse to live under the same roof with me ? ”

She bowed her head solemnly.

“ That is my unalterable determination.”

She shuddered, and tried to draw her hands out of his clasp. He released them voluntarily.

“ You believe that my hands are blood-stained. You dare to think that I made away with that man, because he disappeared before breakfast during the night after our interview.”

“ I don't know what to think. I have asked you to tell me that I wrong you. You won't even do that. As it seems to me, it looks black—oh, so very black, Oscar ! ”

“ How does it seem to you ? Come, show the black negative that fancy has made of me on that excitable brain of yours.”

“ Fancy ? Oh, say that again, Oscar ! Tell me it is all fancy.”

“ All ? That is what I cannot do. Things look dark for me, I admit.”

“ Dark, hideously dark ! A man comes here to foreclose on our home. You have a long and angry interview with him: I know that by the sound of your voices. In his room the next day

A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

his gripsack is found, standing open as any one would have left it who had just gone out for a walk. You pretend to wait breakfast for him, saying you had seen him walking towards the Althea bridge. He never comes back. Days afterwards, on my way to Mammy's cabin at the other end of the place, I find this in the walk. You forgot how often I walked through that lonely bit of woods to see the old creature." She flung upon the table before him a Russia-leather cigar-case, with his own name stamped in gilt on its back. She held her trembling hands before her face for a second and then went on rapidly and resolutely:

"When I told you I wanted to talk with you to-night, Oscar, it was to carry out a deliberately formed plan. I was going to plead with you for the truth. I have done that. If you could not or would not of your own volition clear up this mystery, I was going to give you the grounds for my horrible suspicions. I am doing that now."

"With a nerve quite creditable to your age and sex," he said austerely.

"It is simply something I must do, Oscar. I must show you how this thing looks to others. Suppose, for instance, that Miss Rittenhouse, instead of I—knowing as she did how puzzled

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

we all were over the man's non-appearance at the breakfast-table—had found that cigar-case where I found it ? ”

At mention of Miss Rittenhouse's name Leighton had suddenly gone ghastly white and clenched his hands fiercely about the arms of his chair.

“ Leave her out of the discussion. Don't bring her name into it.” His voice was hoarse with passion.

Rebecca leaped to a conclusion with feminine celerity. “ He loves her, and it is agony to have such a possibility presented to him.”

With her suspicions thereby tinged a yet blacker shade, she went on rapidly:

“ Leave her out, by all means. I am glad she was not with me, as she so often is, Oscar, when I go through the woods to Mammy's cabin; glad she was not with me when I found your cigar-case. When a little farther on, the strange trampled look of the golden-rod and the blackberry-vines on the side of the path set me to wondering, and then to searching, with my heart beating like a hammer, until—until I found—oh, Oscar, you know what I found in the old plantation burying-ground up yonder in the magnolia-grove ! ”

“ A new-made grave ? ”

A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

"Yes; and you know, I know, that the old burying-ground has been disused for ten years. Nobody ever goes there nowadays."

"Excepting over-curious young ladies."

She looked at him with eyes full of horrified curiosity.

"And you can talk of it all so calmly?"

He was turning his recovered cigar-case about in his fingers. She laid her little hands upon his strong shoulders, almost as if she would have shaken him if the physical strength had lain in her.

"Oscar, Oscar, tell me that that new-made grave does not hold that man."

"I cannot, for it does."

"Tell me, then, that he did not come to a violent death here, on our lands."

"I cannot, for he did."

For a full moment she held him thus, as if her agony must find relief in a final confession forced from him. None came. She dropped her eyes to the floor. She could no longer endure to look into his face.

"Then words are of no avail. My tears, my prayers, count for nothing. I am going away to-morrow, Oscar."

"I hold myself in readiness to send you to the Boston Conservatory. You can start immedi-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

ately, if that is your wish." He said it very gently.

"I would not go on blood-money. If that man came here to foreclose a mortgage on Frogneck, it must be because some one has a better right to it than we have."

"Yes. Some one in Chicago still holds a sword over my head."

"Your conscience must hold a sharper one, Oscar."

"Leave my conscience to my own scourging, if you please."

"That is what I intend to do after to-night."

"As you decline my offer of the Conservatory, I presume you have some better plan for yourself."

"At least an honester one."

"Bitterness is not becoming to your sex, child. I suppose I may inquire your intentions."

"To earn my own bread in uncontaminated air."

"Laudable. And your first step?"

"Has already been taken. Mamie Schultz is going to rent me a room."

"Mamie Schultz? If I remember rightly, that is the name of the young person our mother

A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

used to employ by the month to do plain sewing."

"The same."

"And you propose a partnership?"

"No. Sewing would kill me. It would leave me too much time for thought, and I could not do it fast enough to earn my salt. I am going to try to get a clerkship."

"Stand behind a counter?" he asked angrily.

"It is honest, and the money I shall earn by it will be clean money."

"It is not necessary, Rebecca, that you should labor, even if you do leave this house. I shall say nothing to shake your decision in that direction. Perhaps you will be happier from under the shadows that enwrap us as a household. Let me furnish you with funds."

She looked at him defiantly:

"Hear me, Oscar Leighton, and hear me, high Heaven! Before I will ever knowingly benefit to the amount of one cent by the money made on this place until the hideous mystery of that grave in the magnolia-grove is made clear, I will beg my bread from door to door, or go as a nurse in a smallpox hospital."

"You are a silly girl and a presumptuous one. You have never borne hardships of any descrip-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

tion, and yet make an affluent boast of your intentions to give up everything, encounter anything."

"A woman can give up much for conscience' sake, Oscar, or encounter anything for the sake of peace."

He held out his hands to her entreatingly:

"My little Spartan, my little Rebecca, when you get farther along the thorny ways of this world, you will come to place a lighter estimate on the shadows of things as they seem, and reserve all your heroics for the darker realities."

"Is not that dead man a dark reality, Oscar?"

"One with whom I would gladly exchange places. But it is of yourself I want now to talk. How will our mother brook this wild notion of yours?"

"Mother! What am I to her? What is any one to her since Dick went? Dick was her idol. He broke her heart and disappeared. With the going of Dick, life ended for her. With Miss Rittenhouse to read to her, talk to her, play for her, she has all that she cares for in the way of companionship. I am nothing to her. Days go by without her even mentioning my name. It was her boys she doted on. When father died, my best friend left me. And now—and now—"

A DISCOVERY AND AN ACCUSATION

Sobs shook her slight form so violently that she could not finish her sentence. She turned away and dropped into her chair. Leighton let her weep until the first violence of her grief had expended itself. Then he went over and laid a caressing hand upon her bowed head.

"Poor little storm-tossed girl! Becky—child—"

She faced him with blazing eyes.

"Don't touch me! Don't dare to touch me!"

"Rebecca"—a note of infinite sadness filled his voice—"I have carried you in my arms, held you to my heart, loved you and shielded you from harm all your young life; and am I now to be shunned as if I were a leper?"

"Worse, far worse: a man who voluntarily abides in the shadow of a crime. If you were a leper, I could still remember that you were my brother, a man afflicted by God, and I could forget every selfish fear in ministering to your wants; but now—"

She turned and left the room precipitately. He dropped his head upon the table and groaned aloud:

"'And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.'"

V

MISS SCHULTZ, "MODISTE," SCENTS A MYSTERY

MISS SCHULTZ, the "young person" who did plain sewing for Madam Leighton and "others among the best in the county," was thinking of an innovation.

Having patiently stitched her way to a plane of prosperity which warranted Nottingham lace curtains in her parlor windows and two glazed jardinières, respectively a vivid yellow and a dubious terra-cotta, she considered herself entitled to the titular dignity of "modiste."

She resolved to let her light shine before all men. One more touch of elegance, she assured herself, would make her "front just too lovely," and herself perfectly happy.

Not that she was at all unhappy. She acknowledged but two legitimate sources of unhappiness: A disordered liver and—idleness. Her liver was never out of order, and she worked like a little mule. In the yellow jardi-

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

nière an artificial begonia of leathery luxuriance flourished; the terra-cotta one upheld, with like earthless vigor, a paper chrysanthemum in full bloom.

Now she would be perfectly happy with a blue-glass panel, displaying in white letters the seductive word "modiste." Whether her blue panel was to be swung up in the front window, over the yellow jardinière or its terra-cotta neighbor, was an important point still to be decided. She would "ask Miss Rebecca what she thought about it." Miss Rebecca had been the honored occupant of her best up-stairs bedroom now for a month, and it was this addition to her income which was making Miss Schultz reckless in the matter of expenditure.

Having but recently put all these decorative touches on her "front," Miss Schultz made frequent and pardonable excursions around the block, coming back casually by way of the opposite sidewalk, in order measurably to see herself as others saw her.

That unsettled matter of locating the blue panel was of sufficient weight to bring her to a standstill, during one of these excursions, immediately in front of the house across the street from her own. She was sorry the house was vacant. If it had been tenanted, somebody

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

would necessarily have been reminded that she was a modiste and near at hand, every time its long-closed front door opened.

She was standing in a trance of admiration over her recently glorified front, as seen from the marble carriage-block of her more pretentious vis-à-vis, when a shining victoria, harnessed to a pair of high-stepping brown horses, drew up so suddenly at the block that Miss Schultz gave a startled gasp and beat a precipitate retreat. No farther, however, than her own parlor, where, shielded by the folds of her new lace curtains, she could study this phenomenon at her leisure.

"Did you ever !" she said softly, peering out at the shining equipage. "What do they want to stop there for ?"

And "Did you ever !" she said again when a young man stepped out of the carriage and, going up the steps to the long-closed house, fitted a key into the door and opened it.

He came to the edge of the portico and called down, "All right, Hammond." She heard it with her own ears. Then he walked into the house, quite as if he had lived there all his life, while "Hammond," whom she took to be the coachman, immediately sprang down and helped an elderly gentleman out. The elderly gentle-

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

man walked out with a crutch, and it took the crutch and Hammond both quite a while to get him up the low flight of steps.

Miss Schultz was too much absorbed by the last figure that emerged from the victoria to bestow more than a passing glance on the others. They were mere men. This was a woman: young, alert, dressed in what Miss Schultz knew, from her fashion books, to be the very latest mode.

"Did you ever!" She followed the trim figure with covetous eyes. "My gracious! if I could fit like that, I'd soon have to have more than one girl to do my boning and buttonholing."

Then the door closed on the man with the crutch and on the chic young lady, and Hammond came back down the steps, to drive the high-stepping brown horses, not out of sight, but smack-bang through the big wooden door that led into the carriage-house belonging to the house that had engulfed that mysterious party of three.

The "young person's" capacity for marveling received another violent impulse half an hour later, when the Ponola express-van drove up to the house across the street, and began discharging "dead loads" of curious baggage.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Among it a wheel-chair, a setter dog, and a bicycle ! Rebecca was late getting home from Price Brothers' dry-goods store that afternoon—so late that Miss Schultz met her almost reproachfully:

" I'd just about concluded you was going to stand behind that lace counter until lamp-light."

" You didn't wait tea for me ? "

" No. You're so captious about my putting myself out in any way for you."

Rebecca smiled wistfully into her little landlady's plain face:

" Dear old Mamie, I have to be captious with you or you would just turn yourself out of doors for me, and that wouldn't do at all."

" Well, get you along into your slippers and wrapper, and I'll have your supper on the table by the time you're ready for it."

" Slippers and wrapper ! What would Price Brothers say to their lace clerk if they saw her in her luxurious leisure ? "

" It's none of their business—that's what I say. If you, one of the county's best, see fitten to demean yourself by standing behind their counter, they ought to pay a premium for the privilege of having you there. It's been money in their pockets."

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

"What has ?" Becky asked, turning half-way up the stairs.

"Your freak of clerking. Folks are mighty curious, and lots of them go to Price Brothers' just to see Mr. Oscar Leighton's sister standing behind a counter, when everybody in the county knows that the Leightons of Frogneck are the very top of the cream. You know I ain't one bit reconciled to this freak of yours, Miss Becky."

But Rebecca had swiftly pursued her upward course, and closed the door of her own room on Miss Schultz's familiar complaint. So, with only herself for auditor, the little seamstress grumbled on:

"It's a scandal and a ridiculous shame. But what was I to do ? Let her board just anywhere and be treated like she wasn't nobody in particular, or take her in here, and keep her with me till her fancy for playing clerk dies of itself ? She talks mighty proud about there being a debt on Frogneck, poor child, that she must help pay off by being self-supporting. As if Frogneck couldn't pay its own debts and keep its women folks at home. Lord help her ! though if I had a crazy mother like hern, I reckon I'd want to see something outside my home, too."

"Now, then," said Becky, entering the din-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

ing-room, where Miss Schultz was pottering about, setting forth an appetizing meal, "here I am, feeling quite like a lady of leisure; and by the time you've poured me out a cup of your good Ceylon, I'll forget everything hateful that has happened to-day."

"Anybody been pesterin' you, dear?"

"No, oh no. Nothing more than the usual run of women who can't make up their minds over half a yard of lace under half an hour's time."

"Don't talk to me about women," said Mamie violently. "If you had to sew for them, you would find out what a lot of unreasoning, cantankerous, trying creatures they are. Not that they ever phase me, for, say I to myself, 'Mary Schultz, 's long as you've got to make your living out of other women's idleness, you'd better treat 'em with some sort of respect.' And I do, or at least I try to. Now, then, honey, that orange marmalade just can't be beat. I made it myself."

The supper-table in the neat little dining-room of Miss Schultz's cottage was generally the scene of a friendly review of the day, as it had come burdened with varied experiences to both the women. Becky, daintily spreading the orange marmalade on a slice of bread, took alert note of Mamie's suppressed excitement:

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

"Something has happened out of the ordinary in Vine Street to-day," she said with conviction.

Upon which the little modiste burst into narrative somewhat excitedly:

"I should say so ! Now there's some things that Ponola will stand and some that it won't."

"I thought Ponola would stand pretty much any and every thing."

"No, it won't. You don't know Ponola as well as I do. You've lived always on that big plantation eight miles back from the river. There ain't many of us here. And we ain't got much of a town: no street-cars, nor electric lights, nor ice-factory. Not that I can see but what we've got along very well without 'em; but we're an honest, straightforward sort of folks, and Ponola never could abide a mystery."

With the never-absent consciousness of the horrible mystery that had driven her from her own home springing into venomous activity, Rebecca turned startled eyes on her landlady. What could Mamie have heard ? Her parched tongue almost refused to frame a question:

"What—I don't know what you mean."

"I mean this." Miss Schultz sugared her boarder's tea with reckless generosity. "If a mystery turns up anywhere within the corporate

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

limits of this town, somebody's sure to get to the bottom of it before we let up on it."

"But what has turned up?"

"Didn't you notice nothing unfamiliar in the aspect of things when you come home?"

"I noticed your new curtains and the new jardinières."

Miss Schultz smiled with gratification. "Oh, that of course. I thought it wouldn't cost much to light the parlor lamp for a little while. I feel like I ought to do it every night, for if Mr. Oscar or Mr. Teddy—"

Becky interrupted her with a cry of pain:

"Don't. Don't, Mamie. You need not light your parlor for them. They have both sworn to have nothing to do with me until I go back home."

Miss Schultz eyed her boarder meditatively. "You Leightons are an awful stubborn lot."

"I am afraid we are. But you were asking me—"

"If you hadn't noticed something out of the ordinary. In the house across the street, I mean."

"The old Robertson house that has been shut up for five years?"

"Yes."

"Why, I don't think I even glanced at it."

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

"Well, I've done more. I haven't done a blessed thing but stare at it for three hours and a half. It's took."

"Taken! Rented, you mean?"

"Bought, rented, or invaded, I can't say which. As Ponola has always understood the matter, when old Madam Robertson died the house was to stay vacant until her youngest grandchild came of age, and then there was to be a partition of this property."

"Well, perhaps the grandchild has come of age."

"She warn't but three years old, to my certain knowledge, five years ago."

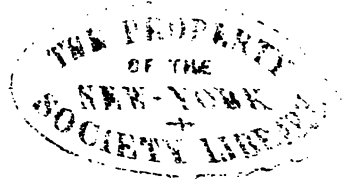
"After all, Mamie, what business of ours is it who has taken the old house?"

"It's a good deal of my business, seeing they are going to live right opposite to me."

"They?"

"Yes. An old man, crippled, or rheumatic, or something or other, that necessitates crutches and a wheel-chair; a younger man—sorter youngish, perhaps about thirty or thirty-five years old, handsome city-cut fellow, with big brown eyes and strong, square shoulders; and a girl, not a day older than you are, if she's as old."

"That makes her just nineteen years old."



FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"I tell you she's a high-stepper. She looked like she might have stepped out of the pages of the September *La Mode* when she got out of the carriage in her drab serge travelling-rig, but she did scandalize me further along. She surely did."

"Scandalize you, Mamie?"

"Yes, there ain't any other word for it. I'm a modiste, and presume I keep up with the prevailing fashions as clost as need be, and I've seen them bicycle costumes in cuts time and again, but I never expected to see one in the flesh right here in little Ponola; and when that young woman come down them steps to the Robertson family mansion, pushing that shining wheel ahead of her, I just felt like I ought to turn my head the other way."

"Why?"

"If you'd seen her you wouldn't ask. Boots up to her knees, and a short flaring cloth skirt that didn't more than touch her ankles; and I'll be switched if I don't believe she had bloomers underneath. It looked so to me as she came down them steps."

"You have been investigating."

"No, not just exactly investigating; but when things happen smack-bang under your very eyes, you've got to shut your eyes or see things."

MISS SCHULTZ SCENTS A MYSTERY

"Yes, but I haven't learned that you have discovered anything very startling yet."

"No, but I'm going to. Them people are from the North. You can always tell them. They've got clearer complexions than we have, and that bicycling girl is as straight as a young poplar-tree. Not that she's half as good-looking as you are, Miss Becky, or would be; if you'd only put away that worried look, you'd be the handsomest girl in the State of Mississippi."

"I am not under discussion," said Rebecca, contracting her brows ominously, "and I may as well tell you now as later, Mamie, that if you and I are to live together harmoniously you must be less personal in your remarks."

"All right; you know I didn't mean any harm by it."

"I know that you are the dearest and best of little women, and I wouldn't have taken refuge with you if I had not been fully impressed with your goodness. But since I have taken refuge here with you, for reasons that seem good and sufficient to myself, it is not pleasant to have you talk to me of my Frogneck life or myself in any way. Now, then, we're clear on that point."

She rose from the table and passed out, stopping to press Miss Schultz's hand in token of amity.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Clear as mud," that young person muttered as the dining-room door closed behind her boarder. "My ! but them Leightons are a stiff-necked tribe."

Later on she went into her little parlor to extinguish the superfluous lamp. She stood in the darkened room to take one last glance at the house across the street.

The drawing-room windows were opened upon the porch. The sound of the long-unused piano floated upon the still night air. The red gleam of a cigar located a smoker on the porch. Miss Schultz sniffed indignantly:

"As much at home as if they'd been born and raised right there."

Then she closed her parlor shutters with a bang.

VI

THE YOUNG WOMAN WHO "SCANDALIZED" MISS SCHULTZ INVADES GOOD SOCIETY

THE young woman whose long bicycle boots and daringly short skirts had so "scandalized" Miss Schultz sat drinking a cup of tea at the unheard-of hour of five in the afternoon.

Unheard of in Ponola, that is. Ponola recognized tea on the breakfast-table as an admissible substitute for robust black coffee where "people couldn't stomach anything strong to start the day on"; it also accepted it cheerfully at supper-time, or at a company lunch, or church sociable.

Ponola was not behind the world in the matter of functions where women and tea were the principal ingredients, but a cup of tea at five o'clock in the afternoon "just didn't stand for anything."

All Ponola knew that the "bicycle lady" was in the habit of drinking tea at that hour, for Mrs. Stringer sold all her milk to the new-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

comers; and when Hammond, the austere domestic, had said stoutly that he must have cream at half-past four, he had to answer a lot of curious "whys" before he could finally secure it. Mrs. Stringer had said "All right" to Hammond's face, and "Well, I never!" to his back.

In entire unconsciousness that her afternoon cup of tea had furnished material for the local chroniclers, the young woman drank that particular one somewhat hastily, and, daintily wiping her slim pink finger-tips on the fringed doyley under her saucer, walked over to a handsome roll-top office desk—an incongruous exotic among Mrs. Robertson's old-fashioned furnishings.

She was busy writing, when the door opened slowly and the old gentleman, who needed two crutches for his slightest effort at locomotion, came into the room. The girl at the desk laid down her fountain-pen and swung briskly towards him in her revolving desk-chair:

"I am very glad you got in so early, uncle. I was about to start out again, and was just making a memorandum of the day's work for you and Mr. Cuthbert to look over. Mayn't I give you a cup of tea?"

The old man sank wearily into a big leather-cushioned chair near at hand:

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

"No, no tea. A stiff julep would be more to my taste. I told Hammond to make me one. Well, anything worth Cuthbert's consideration?"

"I think so. Yes, very decidedly. Only, his request that I should not start him off on a cold trail every other day makes me a little slow about reporting."

"Naturally."

She flung him a bright look, and opened the book she had been writing in as she asked:

"Does that apply to me or to him?"

"To both. Naturally he does not care to waste time and effort on clues that lead up to a dead wall, nor do you care to risk your reputation for astuteness by inaccuracies that have to be explained away."

"That is exactly the point. I will read you the entry I have just made. You can call Mr. Cuthbert's attention to it after dinner."

"Why I?"

"Because I sha'n't be here. I intend to spend the night at Frogneck."

"The devil you do! On whose invitation?"

The girl laughed. A clear, ringing, infectious laugh, had there been any one at hand to take the infection. The elderly cripple awaited her

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

answer in unsmiling patience, threading his long brown fingers in and out of his white beard.

"On my own," she said. "I am not likely to receive one from any other source."

"Not likely. But—"

She flung him an imploring look.

"Now, uncle, don't begin to marshal your 'buts.' You always have an army of them in reserve. You know what this expedition means to me—to all of us, rather. And you must let me do my work in my own way. You agreed to that before we left home."

The old man's face, pinched by habitual suffering, grew a shade paler. He twisted the black-silk skull-cap on his head with a rotary motion. His chair overlooked the quaint prim box-hedging and the long rows of "picayune roses" which had been the boast of the garden "in Mrs. Robertson's time." He was conscious of nothing but his own accumulating perplexities.

"I know it. I know it, Amy, my dear girl. But this bearding of the lion in his den! I did not agree to let you run into actual danger."

She laughed derisively.

"Actual danger! Why, uncle, I am going to spend one night only under the most aristocratic roof in all the county, as the guest of some

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

of 'our best people.' That is the way Ponola folks always talk of the Leightons."

"Frederic Bartlett spent only one night there."

"Yes, but see here. This man Oscar Leighton bears the reputation of being a gentleman. He is no ogre. Personally I am inclined to think him a badly defamed man."

"Who has defamed him?"

"We have, uncle, in our hearts. I fancy no one would dare do so to his face—that face so full of majestic gloom that I feel like a miserable little underhand trickster every time I see him."

"And pray where have you seen him?"

"Once every week he rides into town for his mail matter. I manage always to strike the post-office about the same hour. He's awfully good-looking."

The old man struck the floor violently with one of his crutches:

"Girl, girl, are you, too, going to be beguiled out of your senses by one of that treacherous, venomous brood?"

"You ridiculous old uncle! No, I think not. If I make a present of my senses to any member of the Frogneck household, it will probably be that splendid boy Teddy. But I am dreadfully afraid he is younger than I."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"And where did you see him?"

"I played tennis with him at 'The Briars.'"

"'The Briars'! Not old Jarvis Grayson's place?"

"I believe that is the name of the darling old graybeard who petted me all Wednesday afternoon. I had a perfectly lovely time playing tennis on his beautiful lawn. It is the only well-kept one I have discovered. I have a standing invitation for every Wednesday afternoon. I beat, too—that was the joyous part of it."

"Beat whom?"

"Young Mr. Leighton and some others of 'our best.'"

The withered old cripple in the big armchair chuckled audibly, and rubbed his bony hands over his knee-caps in a paroxysm of delight.

"Well, you are a witch. How did you manage that?"

"Nothing easier. Do you suppose I am going to sit down in old Mrs. Robertson's parlor and wait for somebody to put the clue to this mystery into my hands? Not much."

"But the Graysons are such infernal high-steppers, or used to be. Why, I remember—"

She interrupted him imperiously:

"You remember—nothing. As for my being invited to play tennis at the Graysons' place, it

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

came about this way. I see them every Sunday in church—or what is much more to the point, they see me every Sunday in church. That dear little Mrs. Miles—”

“ The preacher’s wife ? ”

“ Yes, that child with the great surprised blue eyes. You know she called here three weeks ago, after we’d been here only a fortnight.”

“ Yes, I know.”

“ Well, I was one of the unwise virgins on that rainy Sunday when everybody who had not been sensible enough to carry umbrellas was huddled on the church porch, waiting for the rain to hold up. Mrs. Miles introduced me to Mrs. Grayson as Miss Hinton from Chicago, who was spending some time in the South on account of her father’s health—‘ rich as Jersey cream,’ I heard her add behind my back. I let it go at that. So Miss Hinton was invited to ‘ The Briars ’ to play tennis, and Miss Hinton went.”

“ Upon my word and honor ! Why, if old Jarvis Grayson only knew—”

She interrupted him ruthlessly:

“ And there I met Mr. Edward Leighton— ‘ Teddy ’ in the vernacular. He is a handsome sweet-tempered boy, and he and I got to be jolly good friends half an hour after we heard each other’s names.”

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

" Old Jarvis didn't play ? "

" Oh my, no. He can't get about much better than you can. And there are no young people in his family. But these old aristocrats on the big plantations back of town seem to hold together. They quite look down on the mere tradespeople and mechanics of the town."

" They always did. Curse them ! "

" Don't curse my darling old Graysons. Who knows, I may come in for that lovely house and lawn."

" Your chances for a castle in Spain are much better."

" But heavens ! " Miss Hinton sprang from her chair and seized a jaunty cap decorated with one upright quill, from the top of her desk. " I made Hammond hurry up my tea, and here I sit gossiping away the afternoon with you. Soon the night cometh when no woman can work."

" But what is it I am to show Cuthbert ? "

" Perhaps I had better read it aloud. You and he slander my handwriting so systematically."

" As you please."

And from the big black book she read aloud:

" ' Find that within a few weeks after the disappearance of F. S. B. the sister of Oscar Leigh-

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

ton left her home, to take the position of a clerk behind the counter of Price Brothers. Also, that she boards with the modiste, Miss Schultz, on Vine Street, immediately opposite this house.

" ' Also, that, since her removal into Ponola, none of her family have held any communication with her.

" ' Also, that the Leighton family, while held in the very highest esteem by the planter class of the county, are not popular with the common people of Ponola, by whom they are called " queer " and " not like other folks."

" ' Remarks. The removal of Miss Leighton from Frogneck to take up her residence in Ponola is calculated to arouse suspicion among people not given to deep investigations.' "

" Is that all ? "

" All ! Your voice conveys disappointment. I think, considering how very circumspectly I have to go about this thing, and how I've got to play the rôle of a wealthy idle society girl, I've done pretty well in little over one short month."

" Oh, I'm not finding fault with you. Not at all—not at all."

" You had better not. That is one thing I forewarned you and Mr. Cuthbert I would not submit to. If you and he think you can manage this business better without me, you are

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

very welcome to the job. It's a nasty one at best."

"Dear, dear, how fiery you are, Amy !"

But he was not at all certain she had heard him, as she went clattering down the parquette hall-floor with a mighty click-clack of her boot-heels.

The sun was just sinking behind the tallest one of the tall water-oaks that outlined the avenue leading from the great white gate on the public road through the private grounds of Frog-neck, when Teddy Leighton, swinging rapidly homeward afoot, came to a sudden halt with a loud "Halloo !" Then he ran forward at an eager pace.

A shining bicycle with a punctured tire lay prone right in his pathway. A little farther on, in a disconsolate heap on the grassy roadside, he found its owner. She was nursing one of her tan-colored boots with affectionate tenderness, and looked up at him with mute appeal as he stopped in front of her.

"Hello, Miss Hinton !"

"Oh, Mr. Leighton, what shall I do ?"

"Do ? Why, what's happened ?"

"My wheel. My lovely Columbia. I don't care a copper about my sprained ankle."

Teddy went down on his knees in the grass

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

before her, his bright face solemn with solicitude.

"Yes, but a sprained ankle is no joke. How did you manage it? See here: I wish it had happened a little closer to our house."

"To your house? Am I anywhere near your house? Frogneck, don't you call it?"

"You are on Frogneck, and the house is just beyond that clump of magnolias."

"Then I am a trespasser, and it serves me right. I had no business leaving the public road. Ouch! but my ankle does hurt."

"I suppose you wouldn't let me carry you to the house?"

He looked down upon her with simple manly anxiety in his clear gray eyes. "You're a slight little body, and I could carry you with all the ease in the world."

She laughed up into his sympathizing face.

"Tote me, as your darkeys say, all the way from here to that clump of magnolias?"

"Easily and gladly."

"But when we got there?"

He laughed gayly:

"I should put you down."

"Inside or outside your house?"

"Certainly not outside." He flushed a dark red. "The household of Frogneck may not

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

have commended itself to you socially, Miss Hinton, but it has never been lacking in good breeding or hospitality."

"Now you are angry with me for my silly jest. And I am so sorry." She offered him her hand with a disarming smile. "I only meant I had no right to ask for a night's entertainment from entire strangers. I think I could walk that far leaning on your arm. If you'll just pull me up on to my feet slowly."

"Delighted." He drew her up to his side with infinite gentleness. "Now, if it hurts very much, I beg of you to let me carry you. Lean on my shoulder heavily. I'm tremendously strong."

"You are indeed." They started towards the house; he with a heart beating joyously at this romantic episode, she suffering compunctions of conscience much sharper than those twinges of the ankle she had purposely twisted when flinging her wheel over the root of a tree.

Teddy inaugurated a cheerful conversation:

"It was lucky I was late in getting back from the millet-field. I told Oscar I'd look after that crop for him. You might not have seen anybody else on the road, and your voice wouldn't have reached anywhere. I'm so glad I happened along."

THE "SCANDALOUS" YOUNG WOMAN

"Oh, yes, but it would. I should have screamed so loud with fright when it got dark that somebody would have had to come from somewhere. I am afraid I am a dreadful coward."

This admission seemed to warrant Teddy in giving the hand that rested on his arm a gentle little squeeze.

"She was such a frank, outspoken child," he said to himself. To her he said, "Now I'm sure you are slandering yourself."

"Indeed I'm not."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Oh, pretty much everything. Rats and bugs and snakes and—and—everything excepting—"

"Well?"

"Men."

"I reckon it's just the other way with men. They are afraid of you."

And exchanging nonsensicalities of a like order, they advanced, as rapidly as Miss Hinton's sprained ankle would permit, to the portecochère without encountering any one.

Teddy released his arm from her hand to open the front door. She detained him almost pleadingly:

"Oh, wait a moment, please, Mr. Leighton."

"Well."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Perhaps your mother won't look as kindly on this intrusion as you do?"

"You are not likely to see my mother. She is very much of an invalid, and keeps to her own apartment."

"Your sisters, then."

Teddy's handsome face clouded suddenly:

"I have but one, and she is away from home. Miss Rittenhouse, I am sure, can do something to make your ankle more comfortable. Is it very much swollen?"

She had the grace to blush and drop her eyes.

"Oh, it's dreadful. But I've grown used to all sorts of knocks since I became a wheel-woman. Who is Miss Rittenhouse? You see we Yankees know how to ask questions."

"She is my mother's companion—tiptop sort of a lady."

Then he opened the big front door almost regretfully. This tête-à-tête with a sweet shy girl had been very charming.

She saw it opened almost reluctantly. This dear confiding boy had made her wince over the rôle she was doomed to play.

VII

MISS HINTON SUFFERS FROM A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

MISS RITTENHOUSE, lamp in hand, was conducting Miss Hinton along the upper corridor to the chamber that had been made ready for her.

Their progress was slow because of Miss Hinton's ankle and her insatiable curiosity touching the beautiful old home she had invaded.

Pictures lined the dark-tinted walls, alternating with the stately mahogany doors that gave ingress to statelier bedrooms on either side. The rich moulding of the heavily gilded picture-frames and the burnished plated door-knobs glistened in the lamplight.

A bow-window at the end of the corridor, stone-capped and arched, enframed the full yellow harvest-moon that had climbed above the sombre foliage of the magnolia-trees. A lace-work of jessamine-vines webbed the open space, breaking the moon's rays into fantastic ara-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

besques upon the polished bare floor. As the wind moved the jessamine-vine, it shed showers of fragrant starry blossoms on the deep window-sill.

Amy came to a halt before the portrait of a man younger and dressed in much more modern style than any of the other family portraits lining the corridor. She turned bright inquisitive eyes on Miss Rittenhouse:

"Here is an anachronism. All those other gentlemen are ancestral. This handsome fellow belongs to to-day. Is it, perhaps, Mr. Edward, banished the drawing-room for being naughty?"

With reluctant courtesy Miss Rittenhouse, too, paused:

"No, that is the picture of Mr. Richard Leighton. He was older than Teddy, and much handsomer, they say."

"'Was' and 'they say.' Then you have not seen him."

"No."

"Is he dead, so young and so full of life?"

"I do not know. His family never speak of him. All that I know about him Mrs. Grayson has told me. She is a desperate old gossip. She says that 'Dick' Leighton used to be called a vagabond-gentleman. He had tastes so en-

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

tirely foreign to those inherited from an intensely proud father and mother."

"He might have tastes foreign to his inherited ones and yet not be wholly a vagabond," Amy said, not without a touch of acerbity. "'Noblesse oblige' is a very good motto when your noblesse obliges you to do great things and to refrain from doing mean ones; but when it simply obliges you to think yourself a little better than your neighbors it is a stupid fraud."

To this somewhat strident expression of opinion Miss Rittenhouse returned a languid "Doubtless you are right," and moved on at a slightly accelerated pace.

Amy accommodated herself to her guide's steps, and moved on with a perceptible limp, resting her hand on Miss Rittenhouse's arm.

"I feel for all the world," she said with a light laugh, "as if I had wandered into an enchanted palace. Everything is so quiet, so well ordered, and so elegant. And you are the lovely princess who presides over it all—a beneficent genius who condescends sometimes to minister to inferior mortals. I am the mere mortal in this fairy tale."

Miss Rittenhouse answered this effusion coldly:

"Sometimes mere mortals are silly little flat-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

terers, and try to make game of plain people. Doesn't the moonlight make a lovely picture through those vines? I never tire of that window."

"It is perfectly in keeping with the solemn beauty of this old home," said Amy more seriously.

A gayly turbaned head and a smiling black face suddenly confronted them. Miss Rittenhouse stopped abruptly. Amy, keenly alert to every sight and sound among her strange surroundings, fancied a sudden paling of the soft olive cheeks of her guide as the dusky maid said gently:

"Missy's room is ready for 'er, Miss Ollie. I been carryin' a glass of orange-leaf tea in there. Mr. Teddy said it would insure her sleeping good."

"Mr. Teddy is very kind," said Amy, blushing vividly. "Please thank him for me, Miss Rittenhouse."

But Miss Rittenhouse was staring strangely into the room before which they had stopped.

"Why did you prepare that room, Suzanne?"

The black face lost its genial look of welcome. Suzanne's judgment had been challenged before company. She answered almost sullenly:

"'Cause the muskeeter-bar was already up,

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

and the bed ain't never been slep' in but that one night."

"Oh, very well. This is as good as another."

"As good!" Miss Hinton passed over the door-sill with a little ejaculation of delight. "I should say so, my lovely Princess Rittenhouse! Come, dear, give me a name that fits princess better." She laughed audaciously and flung herself upon a lounge near the window. "I know you think me dreadfully impudent."

"No. Only frank and outspoken like the average Chicago girl."

Amy turned surprised eyes on her:

"Then you have been to Chicago?"

"Yes. Once, a long time ago. You asked me for a less ugly name than Rittenhouse. My given name is Olivia."

She put the lamp down on the table and walked over to the toilet-table. Miss Hinton made a mental memorandum:

"Decidedly discomposed at slip of tongue. She doesn't want to talk about Chicago."

Miss Rittenhouse returned from her inspection of the dressing-table and stood leaning one hand on the little table at the head of the lounge, a graceful, statuesque personality.

"I believe Suzanne has put out everything you want, and so I will say good-night."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Oh no, please, dear Princess Olivia, don't go yet. I am sure my ankle won't let me sleep a wink to-night, and to-morrow, you know, I shall be going back to Ponola, right after breakfast, and will lose sight of you for ever and ever."

Miss Rittenhouse seated herself on the lounge.

"A very slight loss it will be, too—for you, I mean."

A distinct constraint had crept into her manner. Amy took quick mental notice of it:

"She is anxious to get away from me, and she sha'n't do it just yet awhile."

"You are going to sit down and tell me something about this enchanted palace before you go, and then, after I have laid me down in that magnificent carved and canopied four-poster, I will be able to dream more intelligently about the Leighton family. I am afraid, I really am horribly afraid, I am on the brink of falling in love. I've had every conceivable sort of tumble but that. I've got premonitory symptoms."

"Teddy is a nice boy, a bright, handsome, sweet-souled lad. You wouldn't be his first conquest."

"Oh yes, but it is with your most superb Mr. Oscar. He is just grand, only with a touch of sombreness."

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

"He is a truly noble man, heavily burdened with the sorrows of others," said Olivia quietly.

"You have known him a long time?"

"No, not so very long. I came here three years ago, in answer to an advertisement for a companion and governess."

"Governess to that delightful Teddy?"

"No, oh no. They have a younger sister. She is away from home just now." Then with a gesture of impatient scorn: "There is no use trying to make a secret out of what all Ponola knows. Rebecca Leighton is a hard-headed fanciful girl, who has left her home, this home, where she has never known a moment's hardship, because she discovered that a debt was hanging over the place, and she declared she would not avail herself of its revenues until the last dollar was paid. She is clerking somewhere in town."

"What a delightfully quixotic young lady! I wish I knew her. Don't her brothers miss her dreadfully?"

With a sudden sense of imprudence in discouraging so freely of the Leighton affairs with this brightly inquisitive stranger, Miss Rittenhouse moved towards the door.

"That I can't answer," she said curtly.

She stopped at the foot of the bed, and taking

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

from it a daintily belaced and beruffled night-gown, brought it over to the lounge.

"We must save that ankle every unnecessary step. I think this will fit you better than one of mine. I am a good deal taller than you."

Amy took the gown and spread it over her lap.

"Only enchanted palaces keep ready-made clothes to fit everybody. This looks as if my measure had been taken for it." She was crimping the lace ruffles of the gown with a swift movement of her slim fingers.

"It is one of Rebecca's. She took nothing with her but what she wore," said Miss Rittenhouse.

"What heroism ! I just must know that girl."

"Shall I send Suzanne to you ?"

"What for ? I'm not one of your pampered ones. I never was helped to undress in my life."

"No, but she can pour cold water on your ankle, and you cannot do it very thoroughly yourself."

For a wistful moment Amy hesitated. How kind and unsuspecting these people were ! She "had been treated like a queen down-stairs by those two splendid Leighton fellows, and by this beautiful sad-faced Miss Rittenhouse."

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

But then she was under contract. Her face hardened, her eyes brightened. The zeal of the hunt overcame every social scruple.

"Yes, please. I suppose I shall sleep better for bathing it in cold water."

Miss Rittenhouse went. Suzanne came, soft-voiced, soft-footed, obsequious, hovering in her tenderness.

Amy, looking down upon her dark luminous eyes, realized that an opportunity had come to her. She winced at thought of how those high-bred Leightons would scorn her if they could see through that great shining mahogany door and discover her gossiping with their house-girl.

Suzanne squatted comfortably on the hearth-rug, and gently laved the round white ankle, that really did show a slight purple contusion in one place.

After all, it was Suzanne who started the gossiping.

"Yous an' our Miss Becky's foots 'zackly one size. She wars a number three. So does you."

"That's doing pretty well for a Chicago foot."

"Is you from Chicagy, missy?"

Amy, lying back luxuriously on the lounge, enjoying the skilled ministrations of Suzanne's

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

deft black hands, sat up suddenly at the question.

"Yes. Did you ever see anybody else from Chicago?"

"I been hear Miss Olivvy live there before she come here to read to ol' miss and teach little Milly her books."

"Who is little Milly?"

Suzanne's head dropped until her gay turban almost touched Miss Hinton's knees.

"I ain't quite clar in my own min' who she is. Mr. Oscar'd send me whoopin' out'n this yard if he ketch me tattlin' with folks 'bout his family 'fairs."

"Mr. Oscar is not going to catch you. I shall be going away from here after breakfast, and you will never hear of me again."

"I is sorter sorry fo' that, missy. 'Cause this house is got to be a mighty sober sort'n house. Mr. Dick he usen to be always on the laugh or the go."

"Then here is something to make you glad." A silver dollar was quietly transferred from Miss Hinton's pocket to Suzanne's.

After a pause, sufficiently long for Suzanne to recognize the magnitude of her good fortune, she fluently volunteered to increase Amy's stock of information.

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

"Us house-folks strongly suspicions that little Milly is Mr. Dick's child. Ol' miss is a proud un, and though she never would 'low Mr. Dick's wife, his own true wedded wife, to cross that threshold, she warn't the one to let a child which had her blood in its veins be left on other folks's hands."

"So then Mr. Dick is dead?"

"Yessum."

"And Mr. Dick's wife?"

"Yessum. Leastwise us house-folks don't know nothin' to the corntrairy."

Having cold-watered the swollen ankle lavishly, Suzanne now held the small plump foot in her lap while she gently dried and patted it.

"Suzanne," said Miss Hinton imperiously, "I am going to ask you a question, and you must answer it, believing that I have a right to ask it, but that no one shall ever know you answered it."

A frightened look was Suzanne's only response. She was young, ignorant, subservient, and black. This imperious young lady was her superior in every particular. She belonged to the dominant race. She was white.

"I want to know why Miss Rittenhouse was startled at the idea of your putting me in this room."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Suzanne looked relieved. She even laughed a soft, mellow, lazy laugh.

"There ain't nuthin' 't all wrong with this room, missy. Nuthin' in Gawd's world. Miss Ollie she seems lak she ain't never lak to come here since that white man spent one night here and clared out so onceremonious-like the nex' mornin', without even waitin' for his breakfas'. But shucks! that ain't nuthin' against the room."

"What white man?"

"I dun know 'm. He come aftern us house-folks hed all gone to our cabins for the night. A mouty stormy night it were, and when Jack come up to get his boots to blacken the nex' mornin', he say the gentleman tol' him; real pleasant-like, it warn't no use to bother with his shoes till he come back from a walk. He say he always took a walk befo' breakfas' fur his 'gestion's sake."

"And he didn't come back?"

"No, honey. That were the last ever seen of him at this house. Curious part of it, he lef' his gripsack open on that very table, jus' whar he opened it to get out fresh collars and cuffs."

"What became of his things?"

"I reckon Miss Ollie had 'em put away."

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

She's the housekeeper here sence ol' miss done give up the keys."

"And so he slept in this room?"

"This ve'y room. But the room's all right, missy."

"It is a beautiful room," said Miss Hinton, yawning conspicuously, "and I am very sleepy. Good-night, Suzanne."

Suzanne rose slowly to her knees and then to her feet. Her large soft eyes sought Amy's imploringly. They were full of trouble.

"Missy, you ain't goin' to let on that I done give you any information, is you?"

The Chicago girl held out her hand reassuringly.

"Not for worlds, Suzanne. Not for worlds."

And, with a grateful smile, Suzanne passed through the door leading into the corridor, closing it softly behind her.

Clasping her hands meditatively about one knee, Miss Hinton scrutinized her beautiful bedroom with bright searching eyes.

"Elegance, restfulness, repose; tragedy, mystery, unrest; I must reconcile them."

Forgetful of the purple contusion on her ivory-white ankle, she rapidly slipped out of her own garments and into the rose-scented gown Suzanne had laid out for her. Her feet

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

were already encased in a pair of soft knitted bedroom shoes, which made her movements absolutely soundless.

Carefully drawing together the heavy brocatelle curtains which hung from gilded poles at the two large windows of her room, she instituted a rigid search of the premises. At the end of half an hour she flung herself down upon the lounge, baffled and disconcerted.

"I know no more this moment than I did before stealing into this house. He came here and he went away. Which is pretty much what I shall do."

She slowly drew off her knitted shoes and sat down upon the side of the bed. She put her lamp upon a small square stand near its head-board, and lay down without extinguishing it. Its proximity to her pillows was inviting. "A perfectly delightful chance to read herself to sleep." If only she could find a book. It was the one thing her room seemed poorly furnished with.

She lay quite still with her hands clasped behind her head, and her eyes roving about the large apartment on a fresh searching expedition.

Had her golden opportunity come to her, and she too stupid to extract anything from it?

A SPRAINED ANKLE AND—REMORSE

This room must be made to yield up its secret before she left it, never to return. She felt intensely wide awake. She should like to know, before extinguishing her light, where the match-box was located. A diligent search in probable places failing to produce it, she essayed the various drawers of the various bureaux, armoires, stands.

The last one to be investigated was in the small stand by the bedside. She tried to pull it open. It resisted. She persevered. After a gain of an inch or two she slipped her hand in to discover the impedimenta. A book had opened of its own accord inside the drawer and prevented it from moving.

Smoothing down the crumpled leaves, she gave a violent jerk and brought the drawer entirely out of its socket.

She gave a low cry of exultation as she stooped to pick up the scattered contents. They consisted of a carelessly bound paper novel, a writing-pad with a pencilled memorandum on its first page, a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and a lead-pencil.

"Evidently slipped them into the drawer from the bed, and expected to remove them next morning." Mentally congratulating herself on the careless system of housekeeping which had

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

left these silent witnesses for her to discover, Miss Hinton tore the memorandum from the writing-pad and folded it up only after a second reading of it.

Then she shook her head almost sadly. All the triumph of the discovery was merged into a strange sympathy for the man it implicated. For safe-keeping she pinned the memorandum to the inner side of her corsets. Then she flung herself on her bed with a sigh.

"It looks bad for him. Desperately dark, and—and—I am sorry I ever stirred a finger in the matter."

The old room had given up its secret.

VIII

CUTHBERT OFFERS VALUABLE ASSISTANCE TO BECKY UNDER TRYING CIRCUMSTANCES

THE "Mr. Cuthbert" to whom Amy's memorandum of the day's doings was to be submitted was still absent when Hammond lighted the quaint red-globed lamp which shed such a deeply roseate hue over the large hall and its old-fashioned belongings.

The elderly cripple to whom she had taken the precaution of reading the memorandum, so as to insure an intelligent reception for it, alternately fidgeted, dozed, and hobbled on his crutches from his big leather chair to the front windows and back.

The shadows of the gloaming deepened into those of night. Hammond put his head in at the library door with increasing frequency to ask if Mr. Cuthbert had come yet.

The lame man sent back a negative of increasing petulance each time. He was hungry. He adored punctuality. He hated the unexplained,

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

always. Impatience was rapidly merging into anxiety.

He turned on Hammond irritably:

"I say, Hammond, you are sure he left no message, saying he would not be home to dinner at all?"

"None with me, sir."

"With cook then, perhaps?"

Hammond drew himself up with offended dignity:

"Mr. Cuthbert is 'customed to leave all orders with me, sir. Where should he dine in this measly little town, if not at his own table, sir?"

"Oh, there are places. Jimmie Dale's, for instance."

Hammond's sniff of scorn almost achieved the dimensions of an angry snort:

"We ain't reduced quite to a pig swill-tub yet, though I do admit Ponola is somethin' of a come-down after our own house on Michigan Avenue. Of course you don't see the contrast so sharp, Mr. Hinton."

"I see that you are a presumptuous flunky," said the lame man angrily, "and if I don't report your insolence to your master, it will be because I have matters of greater importance to discuss with him."

Hammond withdrew without apology. He

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

had no fear of being reported. "Old Hinton knew on which side his bread was buttered." But he, Hammond, rather resented the fact that "old hop-and-go-fetch-it" was deeper in his young master's confidence than himself. He had been a trusted and intelligent retainer of the Cuthbert family since his fifteenth year. But "who was old man Hinton?"

On this particular occasion he was in a particularly bad humor. "At home" a little delay on Mr. Cuthbert's part occasioned no discomfort. There was always something to amuse one's self with, living as the Cuthberts did on such a grand, fashionable avenue. Hammond opened the front door and stood, hands in pockets, his sturdy legs far apart, sharply outlined against the rosy background of the hall. "But here there was nothing to see, nor no light to see it by if there was."

Hammond's strictures upon the social barrenness of Ponola could not be gainsaid. From the lofty vantage-ground of Mrs. Robertson's front porch he looked straight across at Miss Schultz's humble abode. The faintest glimmer of light over the front door revealed, through the medium of its uncurtained transom, the fact that "folks over yon way principally lived in the back rooms."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

To the right and to the left of him were tangled, riotous little flower-gardens, hiding small one-story, dimly lighted frame cottages behind their overgrown and ambitious shrubbery. Ponola was guiltless of any street-lighting device, so that it was more by sense of sound than sight that Hammond knew his long vigil was about to end.

A magnificent setter, evidently weary from a prolonged day afield, trotted slowly into sight, her red tongue lolling, her silky ears drooping almost to the ground. The sight of the open house-door revived her drooping spirits. She took the steps at a bound, and wagged her tail in response to Hammond's greetings with a vigor that meant she could tell him wonders if only human speech were hers.

"Hello, Vixen, what have you done with your master?" Then the subdued murmur of voices caught his ear, and he peered out into the night, wondering and expectant.

The broad lane of light sent by the high swinging lamp behind him illumined that portion of the street directly in its pathway. Miss Schultz's front gate was one of its beneficiaries. Even as he asked Vixen that futile question, Hammond's roundish eyes distended into perfect circles. "I'll be dogged!" he said under

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

his breath, and permitted himself a soft whistle.

There, right under his very eyes, stopping at the dressmaker's, was Mr. Cuthbert and that young woman that lived across the way ! Not the sewing one—the one that looked like a lady, only she couldn't be, for cook said she was a clerk in some store down-town !

If it were not for Vixen crouching at his feet, as she always did when suffering the pangs of hunger, Hammond would refuse to believe that that was Mr. Cuthbert across the way.

He stepped discreetly backward into the hall, and was virtuously busy with the umbrella-stand, when a light springy step on the front porch put an end to all doubt. The lame man's pale face appeared at the library door just as Cuthbert framed his in the open front door.

The old man said " Well ! " peevishly.

The young one laughed cheerily.

" Did you think I had been gobbled up by the alligators ? "

" No, not by alligators, but—"

" Dinner, Hammond, while I trim up a little."

" There's nobody here to dress for. I'm all alone in the house," said the lame man plaintively.

Cuthbert was half-way up the fine broad

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

flight of stairs leading to the upper story. He paused with his hand on the polished oak banisters.

"Why, where is Miss Hinton?"

"Spending the night out. I'll explain after dinner."

"All right. I've got a story to tell, too. Then I'll be with you as soon as I've bathed my face and hands. Hurry up dinner, Hammond."

And he proceeded on his upward way while Hammond retreated towards his pantry. He was not in the best of humors.

There was a mystery afloat. Old man Hinton was "in it." He, Hammond, was excluded. This whole freak of a sojourn of Mr. Cuthbert's was a mystery. Hammond never had been quite clear in his mind as to what this strange expedition into this benighted region meant.

"Him to pick up and leave the comfortablest of homes, and fetch with him a old man and a young woman who" (to Hammond's certain knowledge) "was nobodies from nowheres, and just picked up by Mr. Cuthbert—for why, the Lord only knows."

The two men made short work of their belated dinner. Each tacitly hurried the other from soup to coffee in order to get back to the

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

library, where, behind closed doors, the day's progress could be reported.

Dinner and suspense lifted improved Mr. Hinton's temper appreciably. He was a handsome old man, with a keen blue eye and a pleasant smile—when things went to suit him.

"Let's have your story first," he said, lighting the cigar offered him by Cuthbert; "mine is short. I can tell it in the tail end of the evening."

"All the more reason why we should have it first. Mine is rather curious. Can't be said in a breath like the Lord's Prayer. You first."

Making sure that his own cigar was well alight, Cuthbert stretched himself luxuriously in the red plush reclining-chair under the lamp.

He was a handsome stalwart young fellow, with the clean-cut profile of a Greek god and the searching, penetrating eye of a man thoroughly alert as to all that touched his own concerns. A thick crop of sunny brown hair covered his well-shaped head; otherwheres no hair adorned his face. His singularly sweet firm mouth, with its flexible lips curling slightly upward in the corners, was smooth-shaven and clean as a woman's.

"Well, if it's me first," said Hinton, stumping over to the desk and bringing back with him

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

the day-book, "Amy said I was to read this to you. It seems she's found out that Leighton's sister has left home and is clerking downtown."

"So have I."

"Oh, you have." The old man's voice lost its note of elation. "And she lives just across the street from us."

"I know that, too."

"Oh, you do. Well, then, maybe you know that Amy has gone to Frogneck to spend the night."

"The devil! No, I did not know that."

And Hinton with diminished interest proceeded with his recital.

"Now," he said, closing the big blank-book with a bang after reading Amy's entry aloud, "let's hear what you've been driving at."

Cuthbert smiled meditatively:

"Frankly, I can't say that I have been driving at anything. Things just happened of themselves. Rather pleasantly on the whole, too."

"When I started out with Vixen this morning, I had no notion I should bag any larger game than a brace or two of the partridges these good people make such a boast of. In point of fact, I cared very little what direction I took or how far I tramped. The sky and the

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

air were full of temptation, and as the serious work of this expedition is in your hands—”

“ Say in Amy’s, rather.”

“ *Place aux dames*. But you are the only one of the trio familiar with the ropes. I am merely master of the exchequer.”

“ A very important factor. But to get back.”

Cuthbert laughed lazily:

“ Yes, to get back, which I believe is what you and Hammond thought I was not likely to do.”

“ I was afraid you might have fallen in with a Leighton.”

“ That has been my good luck.”

“ Your *good* luck ? ”

“ My extremely good luck.”

“ I’ll be hanged ! ” said the lame man emphatically, and then he subsided into an expectant silence. He knew by experience that Mr. Leslie Cuthbert generally told a story in his own way and time.

“ By the way, Hinton, did you ever know a man about here by the name of Claggett ? ”

“ Cleggett ? ”

“ Cleggett or Claggett ? ”

“ I used to know a man by the name of Tom Cleggett. He and I have emptied many a flask between us.”

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Cuthbert made a gesture of disgust:

"I fancy that is still Mr. Cleggett's vocation in life."

"Out of his cups, Tom is a very good fellow. In them, he is the devil on two sticks," said Hinton.

"It has been my fortune to meet him in the latter character."

"Where did you see him?"

"Sitting in a fence-corner on the side of a field, gibing idiotically at a very handsome young lady who was trying to represent to him that little boys in his condition were best off at home."

Hinton looked puzzled.

"I didn't know there was a young lady, or an old one, in the county that would touch Tommy with a ten-foot pole."

"This one only condescended to touch him with the ferule of her parasol. Vixen discovered the trouble before I did. I had just left the public road, enticed by the shady sweet-smelling paths that the pines overhang, when I heard a sweet voice pleading with somebody to do something which somebody seemed disinclined to do. As I got nearer, the situation looked sufficiently grave to warrant an offer of assistance. I made it. The young lady, who was prodding your

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

friend Tommy delicately with her parasol, looked at me gratefully. She has superb eyes."

"Who has?"

"That Miss Leighton."

"I'll be hanged!" said Hinton; then he whistled softly.

Cuthbert went on rapidly:

"Well, she explained matters promptly. 'You see,' she said, addressing me as frankly as if we had known each other for years, 'his daughter is one of the clerks in our store. A dear sweet girl, who has to support this horrid old wretch out of her hard earnings. She is sick, and I was on my way to see her. Price Brothers gave me her week's wages to carry to her. Of course'—with a withering glance at your friend Tommy—'that thing will get more than half of it, but I can't leave him here on the roadside, for she cares for him. Women are such strange creatures—don't you think?'

"When she turned that bright face of hers on me and asked that question, I was ready, Hinton, to undertake Herculean tasks at her bidding. I just skipped over her question for fear I might answer it like a dolt, and asked her what I should do with her friend. She flashed an indignant repudiation of Tommy at me, and said if I could induce him to get up and go home

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

she would be so much obliged to me. Then she gave me minute directions how to reach the Cleggett mansion, declaring her own desire to run ahead and put Miss Cleggett in safe possession of her money before her respectable papa arrived.

"I quite approved of her plan, and settled down with as much fervor as if I had been a regularly employed roundsman, to the task of persuading the respectable Mr. Cleggett to get up and go home to his sick daughter. My young lady sped on before us nimbly. She was soon out of sight. Then I discovered that Tommy was not half as drunk as we had supposed.

"He looked after his daughter's friend with a drunken leer, and laughed loudly at her scheme for defrauding him of his daughter's wages.

"In fact he grew quite loquacious. Told me that he 'reckoned that girl thought that because she was a Leighton—confound 'em all!—everybody must git up and dust when she give the word. He was going to tell his Jennie she shouldn't have anything to do with that Leighton girl.

"The devil was in all the Leightons, beginning with the old woman. He knew more about Dick's wife than he'd ever told anybody else.

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

Poor Dick ! he was a gentleman—the only real gentleman in the Leighton brood. People called him a vagabond because he didn't agree with the rest of the Leightons in thinking God a'mighty used a superior sort of clay to make them out of.

“ ‘Some of these days he was going to let loose and tell all he knew about Oscar Leighton, and when he did he'd make the fur fly.’

“ You can depend on it, Hinton, that I did not discourage my new-made friend from discoursing of the Leightons. In fact, so well did he entertain me that we reached his own door, cleaving unto each other closer than brothers, before I said a word. When I did, it was to tell him to shut up.

“ A pitiful sight met my eye when we reached the open front door. Evidently the old brute's daughter is a very sick girl. She was lying on a lounge: the open windows and the lowness of the house gave us a full view, and Miss Leighton was ministering to her very tenderly. When she—the sick girl, I mean—saw her tipsy old father being steered into the hall by an entire stranger, she took it into her head that something dreadful had happened, and fainted.

“ The heart of a woman is past finding out,” said Cuthbert thoughtfully. “ Now, I should

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

have thought that nothing could please Miss Cleggett better than to have that old chappie's light permanently extinguished. But she fainted then and there; and he, tipsy old idiot, seeing her condition, took it into his crazy head that Miss Leighton had been maligning him to his daughter. Whereupon he lifted up his voice in cursing.

"I would cheerfully have knocked him down by way of silencing him, but Miss Leighton restrained me with a look from her splendid eyes:

" 'Don't, please; he is not responsible, and it would only make things harder for poor Jennie.'

"At which the old brute, staggering up to the bedside, dropped on his knees with a whine. The sick girl opened her eyes, and Miss Leighton made a motion to leave.

" 'Yes, leave, leave!' the old wretch bawled out after her. 'And don't think you can come here to run Tom Cleggett's house for him just because you are a Leighton. Who are the Leightons? What has old Madam Leighton done with Dick's wife? What has Oscar Leighton done with that chap that rode Black Prince away from Jimmie Dale's and never come back? What became of Black Prince?' "

Cuthbert sat up, flung his cigar into the open

CUTHBERT OFFERS ASSISTANCE

grate, left his chair, and made several turns around the room before he spoke again:

"Before the old brute stopped to take breath that poor little thing had sped out of the house with the cry of a wounded animal, and although from that evil old throat words were pouring out that were calculated to forward the very ends that brought me a thousand miles from home, I would gladly have given him his death-blow on the spot."

Hinton looked at him with a cold sneer:

"You've come under the spell, too, have you?"

Cuthbert flushed hotly:

"I was enough of a gentleman to go in pursuit of that poor child. She had been so long ministering to her friend that I knew it would be impossible for her to get home before dark. Such infernal darkness as these lampless streets are flooded with, too! If it had not been for Vixen, I never should have discovered her. Poor little thing, she had crouched behind a pine-tree, waiting, I suppose, for me to pass her before she tried to get home."

"And you?"

"Thanks to Vixen, discovered her hiding-place, and did what any other gentleman would have done. Saw her to her own door."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

" Oh Lord ! "

" Well ? "

" First Amy, now you."

" I don't understand."

" You will later on."

And seizing his crutches, the lame man
stumped angrily out of the room.

IX

THE FIRM OF HINTON, CUTHBERT & HINTON CONCLUDES TO HAVE A DRESS MADE BY MISS SCHULTZ

THE exotic roll-top desk, which bore no family likeness to any of Mrs. Robertson's elegant antiques, was in constant demand by some one member of "the firm."

The firm-name was Hinton, Cuthbert, and Hinton—"all sleeping members," Amy would have told you in that lively way she had. For the reason that "it would be more than the expedition's life was worth to have the existence of the firm suspected."

Mr. Leslie Cuthbert was seated at the desk the next morning, when that independent young woman entered the room, physically as sweet and fresh-looking as a dew-washed rose, mentally very full of her Frogneck experience.

"Well?" said Cuthbert, greeting her with a smile of frank fellowship, without finding it necessary to leave the desk.

"Well," she answered, perching herself on

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

the arm of a chair within easy conversational distance; adding:

"Finish what you are about, for I shall want your undivided attention when I begin."

"In a moment."

While he addressed himself to the day-book again, she made a brief incursion to the upper story, returning minus her long boots and short skirts. She found Cuthbert lighting a cigar—always a sign of receptivity with him.

"So you spent the night at Frogneck," he said cheerily. "I call that getting in a sharp stroke of business."

She dropped into a chair near him, and answered rather plaintively:

"Yes, I spent the night at Frogneck, and I tell you, Mr. Cuthbert, I never felt meaner in all my life than I did from sunset yesterday afternoon up to eight o'clock this morning."

"You are to be congratulated upon being able to put such accurate metes and bounds to your meanness."

"Well, the time designated covers the exact time that I was the honored guest of those people. This is a shabby piece of business I have gone into."

Cuthbert contracted his fine brows frowningly, as he said coldly:

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

"You can throw up the job at a moment's notice."

"No, I cannot. And you know I cannot. The success of this expedition means more to me than it does to any one involved in the whole miserable affair."

"More?"

"Decidedly. The money you are to pay me when my work is done means the fulfilment of my life's one desire. I shall go to Paris immediately, and become an art student."

"At the present rate of progress I fancy Paris is not imminent."

"Thank you for that genteel little prod, which means 'get back to business.' Where is uncle?"

"I can't say accurately. It is safe to guess that he is sitting in Jimmie Dale's smoking-room, drinking beer and spinning yarns of doubtful veracity."

Miss Hinton brought her small palms down on the arms of her chair excitedly.

"If that sort of thing is to go on, he will give the whole business away in some idiotic fashion."

"The task of suppression must be yours, then. Your venerable relative has certain ineradicable tastes. Well"—this with a quicken-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

ing of his speech—"was your invasion of Frog-neck fruitful of results?"

"I think it was." She cautiously extracted from the bosom of her dress a folded piece of paper. "I was afraid to trust this to any pocket. I believe I have found a key, but, I tell you frankly, I hate awfully to hand it over to you."

Cuthbert reached out his hand eagerly for the paper. She retained it to smooth its creases.

"I perceive," he said, "that you are suffering from the squeamishness attendant upon all amateur detective work at the outset. You will laugh at your present qualms if you go into the business permanently."

"Heaven forefend!"

"I don't know about that. You impress me as possessing a peculiar fitness for it."

Amy laughed and tossed him the paper.

"That means, I suppose, that I am audacious and know when to hold my tongue. On the whole, I am glad Uncle Hinton is out of the way. That paper may as well remain our secret—yours and mine."

Cuthbert did not hear her. He was intently poring over the piece of paper she had put into his hands. Presently he turned thoughtful eyes on her.

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

"This is a damaging bit of circumstantial evidence."

"Decidedly."

"And—but you have not told me yet how you secured it."

"No. I have not told you anything at all, yet, of my invasion of that strange household. I've given you my climax first. Now you will have to read backward."

Then rapidly and succinctly, after the manner of one who lays more stress upon deeds than words, she gave him the story of Teddy's courteous attentions, of Oscar's grave and kindly interest in her accident, and of Miss Rittenhouse's sweet and womanly ministrations. In the excitement of her peroration, her eyes blazed brightly and her soft round cheeks flushed a deep red; Teddy would have called her "divine."

"If ever I was in a house where every member of the family struck me as being just what each seemed, it is that one. My instincts may all be at fault, but I cannot locate a miscreant among them. They are sincerely, genuinely refined people.

"That boy Teddy is a handsome, outspoken, inexperienced young fellow; has seen nothing of the world; is unspotted, generous, sweet-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

natured. *I know* he never murdered any one. His brother Oscar has a severely majestic sort of beauty. He makes me think of some grand old stoic. He has very little to say, but when he turns his great dark sorrowful eyes on you, and smiles, a rare sweet smile, you are ready to swear that he never did a thing he was ashamed of. And the only member left is that Miss Rittenhouse. She is a refined, delicately built woman, very beautiful, highly educated, evidently used to the conventions. Why she should bury herself on that lonely plantation to teach a child its A B C's, and to read to a cranky old woman, surpasses my understanding. Miss Rittenhouse was the only mystifying thing I encountered."

"And this." He still held the slip of paper in his hand.

"Yes, and that."

"And you found it?"

"Caught in the back of a drawer in the little candle-stand at my bed-head. It would seem that he had been reading in bed, for that sheet of paper had been torn from the pad and was inside the book—an old paper-back novel, that had opened of its own accord inside the drawer and made the drawer hard to open."

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

"Strange that it should have remained undiscovered all this time."

"Not at all. I fancy that room has been avoided. If you could see that great rambling house, you could readily understand how the drawer to one insignificant little table could remain undisturbed for months, yes, years. It is not as if an official search had been instituted, you know. In fact, it was evident from Miss Rittenhouse's agitation that I was put into that room by a strange mischance."

"Rather a fortunate mistake for us."

"Very fortunate." She leaned forward to repossess herself of the slip of paper. "Did you notice anything particular about this scrap?"

"No. It seems to have been a letter started to some one in Chicago. 'Dear George' is not sufficiently explicit for our purposes."

"No, but listen. You have missed the point. Let me read it aloud."

And in a clear sweet girlish voice, more befitting the graceful rendering of a May-day poem than the ghastly clue to an unexplained death, she read:

" 'Dear George: I will pencil you a few lines before dropping to sleep. Haven't much to say to-night, excepting—I came, I have seen, but have not conquered.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

“ ‘ This is a grand old domicile. You would be more than ever anxious to foreclose that mortgage if you had ever seen this place.

“ ‘ I have had one infernally disagreeable interview with Mr. Oscar Leighton. We talked until past midnight, and, as the lamp politely extinguished itself, he proposed an adjournment until after breakfast.

“ ‘ While I could see that my errand sent his blood up to white-heat he was courtesy itself to me individually. He impresses me as being the sort of man who could stick a knife into an enemy and draw it out with the most gentlemanly apology for killing him.

“ ‘ I say, would it not be odd if I was to run against *her* while I am in the South? You know I was told that she had gone South, to this very State, in fact, after the mess. But then Frogneck does not constitute the commonwealth of Mississippi.

“ ‘ Will finish this after my final interview with Leighton. If you are needed, will wire you.’ ”

“ Well,” said Cuthbert, a trifle impatiently.

“ Well,” said Amy, tapping the letter with one pink little finger. “ I want to know something about that *her*. Do you know anything about Mr. Bartlett’s private life ? ”

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

Cuthbert's face darkened ominously.

"I know that he passed for a jolly good fellow, and was immensely popular in his set. I know that he chiselled me out of our uncle's good graces, and got himself written down as heir to property that is mine by superior rights."

Amy interrupted him without ceremony.

"Oh, yes, I know all that, too. But do you know whether he ever had any entanglement with a woman?"

"No. He was seemingly the openest and frankest of men. I never trusted him, however. That allusion would indicate that he had."

"So it strikes me. And I am going to devote my energies to unearthing that 'her.'"

"Yes, but you are not going to lose the trail we're on now? Circumstantial evidence points more directly towards Oscar Leighton than ever before."

"Circumstantial evidence, yes," said the girl, with an angry light in her splendid eyes; "but if the grave could only give up the countless innocent men who have been slain on the strength of circumstantial evidence, what a resurrection there would be!"

"No heroics, please. You are aware, doubtless, that there is no personal animus in this business. I simply desire to unravel the mystery

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

of my cousin's disappearance for my own financial ends. I will not pretend that I was fond of him, for I was not. But—and you will please understand this most distinctly, Miss Hinton—I will not permit any personal considerations to interfere with the prosecution of my object. I consider that this paper warrants a decided step on my part."

"Such as?"

"Consulting a lawyer."

She maintained a thoughtful silence of several moments before answering.

"Perhaps it does. But—you understand, don't you, that the moment the case passes into the lawyer's hands, it passes out of mine? That was the agreement before we left home. And then you are losing sight of the dual character of our work."

"True, that does seem so. Did you see the child?"

"At breakfast only. A perfect cherub."

"And the old woman?"

"No one ever sees her but her son Oscar and Miss Rittenhouse."

"And yet Hinton says she used to be the leader of society about here."

Amy laughed scornfully:

"Not a very onerous office, when you remem-

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

ber that society only exists among the cotton-lords, and their principalities are far scattered and remote from each other. These townsfolk count for nothing."

"Did you know that we had a scion from that gnarled old tree in our immediate neighborhood?" Cuthbert asked.

"Miss Leighton? Yes."

"Then you know, perhaps, her friend, Mr. Tommy Cleggett?"

"No, I've heard nothing about Tommy. Enlighten me."

Complying, Cuthbert told the story of his yesterday. At its close she got up and, walking through the folding doors into the darkened parlor, ran one of the holland shades up and looked across at Miss Schultz's yellow and crushed-strawberry jardinières.

She came back to Cuthbert with her pretty face all apucker, and shuddered ostentatiously.

"There is no help for it."

"For what?"

"I shall have to have a dress made."

"Does a woman ever shudder over that?"

"And by that dreadful little Miss Schultz. I have just been looking at her awful jardinières."

"But why did you not supply yourself with a wardrobe before leaving home?"

FORTUNES TANGLED SKEIN

"I did. At the present rate of wear, I have dresses enough to carry me into my fiftieth year."

"And yet want another made?"

"Dear Mr. Cuthbert, you don't suppose I would wear it?"

"No?"

"Of course not. The jardinière modiste is simply a link in our chain. Moreover, Miss Leighton lives there. Poor little thing!"

Cuthbert echoed her "poor little thing" with such gentleness of voice that Amy looked at him keenly.

"There are several roads out of this quagmire," she said to herself as she ran nimbly up the steps leading to her own bedroom.

Presently Cuthbert heard the front door open and close with a business-like bang. He walked lazily to the front windows and looked across the street.

Amy was just applying her knuckles to Miss Schultz's front door. At first sight she seemed to be the only living thing visible in the quiet street, save two white doves that were exchanging courtesies on the low front steps of a trim cottage a little farther up the road; but even as he looked, Miss Schultz's door opened and closed on Amy, and old Mr. Hinton stumped

THE FIRM HAS A DRESS MADE

slowly into view under the overhanging China trees.

"Didn't I see Amy going into that little house across the way?" he asked, when he had stumped his way into Cuthbert's presence.

"I shouldn't wonder. I heard her say something about having a dress made."

The lame man struck the floor ecstatically with one of his crutches.

"She don't let the grass grow under her feet, does she? I tell you, Cuthbert, if that girl chose to go into this sort of thing for a living, Pinkerton wouldn't be anywheres. She's got a head-piece worth a dozen of yours and mine. Not that I haven't my pickings, too. I've got an entry for the day-book myself."

"Oh, you have."

Cuthbert yawned wearily. For some unexplained reason this firm-business had suddenly grown almost nauseating to him. He would be glad when the matter had reached a stage which would warrant his calling in legal advice.

At present he was proceeding along lines peremptorily dictated by Jimmie Dale when giving the advertised-for information.

Before stating what he knew about Bartlett's disappearance, the landlord of the Traveller's Rest had stipulated that no proceedings against

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Mr. Oscar Leighton should be taken until the parties interested in Mr. F. S. Bartlett should have satisfied themselves, by investigations made on the spot, that the missing gentleman had not left Frogneck alive.

The firm of "Hinton, Cuthbert, and Hinton" were making these investigations.

X

MISS SCHULTZ DEVELOPS A VEIN OF MILD MALICE

A SYMPATHETIC word or smile, the gentle pressure of a friendly hand, the glance of an eye, speaking its own loving message, are oftentimes all that is necessary to open the most carefully guarded floodgates.

Becky, coming home from the store after an unusually vexatious day among her laces, discovered at a glance that little Miss Schultz was suffering from suppressed emotion.

That well-disciplined young person removed the tea-cozy, under which she had smothered the waiting teapot, and folded up the napkin that the muffins were swathed in, with an air of palpably manufactured serenity which sat almost comically upon her round face, with its fat freckled cheeks and childish blue eyes.

In the months that the two women had lived together behind the yellow and pink jardinières, a sincere affection, founded upon mutual respect and admiration, had sprung up between them.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"I was so lonely before you came," Miss Schultz would often say, with a smile of reminiscent pity for herself. And Becky, making quick response, would say:

"What would I have done if you had not taken me in?" Upon which little Miss Schultz's fat cheeks would expand into an affectionate smile, that made her almost pretty while it lasted; and so the bond of good-fellowship waxed stronger as the days wore on.

On this particular occasion Rebecca eyed her landlady critically over the tea-things, then challenged her to confession.

"What is it, Mamie dear? Something has worried you tremendously."

And the carefully guarded floodgates were opened. Rebecca had time to dispose of her first cup of tea and butter her second muffin before Miss Schultz's tear-impaired powers of speech came back to her.

Presently, spreading an exceedingly damp handkerchief over the back of her chair, the little modiste explained:

"Worried me? I should say so. I wouldn't make another dress for her if I had to take down my sign and she had to travel from here to Chicago in a night-gown."

"Strong, too strong."

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

"Your tea?"

"No, my dear, your language. One might call it intemperate, indeed."

"Well, then, call it intemperate. If I was a man I'd make it stronger yet."

"Now you are being profane by implication. Who is the vexatious *her* that has thrown you into a white heat?"

Miss Schultz jerked one thumb energetically in the direction of the house across the street.

"That Miss Hinton."

"Miss Hinton? Why, what does she want with a Ponola dressmaker?"

The Ponola dressmaker reared her crest somewhat indignantly. "To make dresses for her, I suppose. She says everything she brought with her is too heavy for this climate."

"But why couldn't she send back to her own dressmaker?"

"I did not ask her why. I suppose I have sewed for ladies quite as well up in the fashions as her. I've sewed for all the best people in this county, inclusive of Mrs. Dangerfield Leighton of Frogneck. And it's hard to get higher up on the ladder than that."

The sudden flush that mounted into Becky's pale cheeks warned the little modiste off dangerous ground.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"But, merciful goodness ! I never struck one like this Chicago girl." And Miss Schultz sighed ponderously.

"Hard to fit ?" Becky asked, by way of showing interest.

"No, she has a lovely figure. Easy to fit as a doll. At least I thought so when I began on her. But she's made me rip and cut out and put in and make smaller and make bigger until I haven't got a bit of gumption left, and I did think I knew something about dressmaking, if I was a ignoramus about everything else."

"You are not an ignoramus about anything," said Becky soothingly. "You have just struck a city girl who thinks that the one who holds the purse is the superior in every respect of the one who serves her."

"No. To be just, she don't strike me that-away at all. She's as pleasant and sociable as need be. But whatever is the matter with that foulard passes my comprehension."

"Let me see this troublesome gown. Perhaps I can suggest something."

"It's the trimmings that don't suit now."

"Try her on lace." Becky's laugh was not quite genuine. "Since I've gone into the business, it is my duty to talk up lace in season and out."

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

Miss Schultz lifted the lamp and tilted her little blunt nose simultaneously:

" 'Gone into the business !' If you was where you belong and would be but for your own ridiculous tantrum, she'd be glad to get a nod from you."

They were in the front parlor by this time, with Miss Schultz holding the lamp high over the pretty foulard gown, which spread its ample folds all over her best sofa.

" Oh, by the way, where do you suppose that young woman has penetrated to ? "

Becky had seated herself by the troublesome gown, and was examining it critically.

" I haven't an idea," she answered indifferently.

" Frogneck."

" Frogneck ? "

" Actually spent the night there ! "

A spasm of pain swept over Becky's sweet face. A look of wistful longing darkened her eyes. Not since the morning she had resolutely turned her back on home and kindred had she heard one word from the dear old place.

She and Teddy had parted in a tempest of angry words. He and Oscar had both told her that their determination to have nothing to do with her until she came to her senses was ab-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

solutely irrevocable. A pang of fierce jealousy pierced her obdurate young heart.

Frogneck was not given—latterly—to promiscuous hospitality. How had this Chicago girl won her way into its reserved circle? She laid the silk corsage back upon the sofa. Miss Schultz's perplexities touching it had sunk into insignificance.

"How do you know she spent the night at Frogneck?" she asked tartly.

"Because she told me so herself. Oh, she's chatty and friendly enough, if she is a crank about her clothes."

"I wonder who invited her there?"

"Nobody. She told me all about it. How her wheel gave out, just about sunset, and she got a sprained ankle, tumbling off it on to the root of a tree; how your brother Teddy came along and insisted upon her going up to the house to wait for her wheel to be fixed."

"Of course. He could scarcely do less."

"And of how everybody treated her like she was a princess—Mr. Oscar, Miss Rittenhouse, and Suzanne."

"Dear old Sue, I wish I could see her."

Miss Schultz turned away suddenly. There were unshed tears shining in her lodger's bright eyes and she could not bear the sight of them.

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

She put down the lamp she had been holding on high all this time, and came near enough to lay a hand tenderly on Becky's drooping head.

"Miss Rebecca, my dear, go home."

Becky drew the little work-roughened hand with its needle-pricked forefinger from her shoulder to press it affectionately.

"Are you tired of me, Mamie?"

"Tired of you! Goodness gracious me, no! I never knew how bright a house could be with just two women in it, before you came. But I repeat, 'go home.' Do you suppose I don't know what a brave struggle you are making? Do you suppose I don't know how your poor little heart flutters at every mention of the old place? It's all very fine to say you're going to help pay off that debt. But let the men who made the debt be the ones to raise it. It's none of your lookout. You wasn't cut out to buffet the world alone. Go back home, my dear."

Rebecca stopped her with an imperious motion of her hand:

"Hush, Mamie, you don't know what you are talking about. No power on earth could make me go back to Frogneck. Tell me"—she gave a great gulp—"something more about your Miss Hinton."

"Do you know"—Miss Schultz was glad to

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

get back to the lower plane of gossip—"I don't believe there's half the matter with that dress she makes out. I do believe she comes here from curiosity as much as anything else"—which showed astuteness on the part of Miss Schultz.

"Curiosity?"

"Yes. I believe she's just dying to know you."

"Me? Why?"

"Oh, well, you know you're a sort of local curiosity. I suppose if Ponola had a dime museum, they'd try to secure you regardless of expense. Young ladies of the best circles who leave their homes and go behind lace counters to make their own living, rather than be fed on credit, ain't come across every day."

Becky looked at her plaintively.

"I suppose I have been dreadfully pulled to pieces by people."

Miss Schultz nodded cheerfully.

"Of course you have. What else was there to expect? You've been the best 'item' Ponola's got hold of for a long time. And, as strangers in a place most generally do go for all the local curiosities, this Miss Hinton wants her innings. She's coming back here exactly at half-past eight o'clock."

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

"For her dress?" said Becky, starting up in alarm.

Miss Schultz laughed maliciously.

"Now do look at her going all to pieces. No, I reckon Hammond the great, will call for that dress, if ever it is wanted across the street. Oh, well, I might as well make a clean breast of it. Miss Hinton asked me if there was anybody in Ponola who gave music-lessons. She said she wasn't much of a musician, but didn't want to lose what little she knew, especially as she found a very good piano in Mrs. Robertson's parlor."

"And you told her?"

Mamie clasped her hands nervously.

"Oh, there now, you are going all to pieces again. I can see it in your eyes. You know you said—yes you did—that if you could get music-pupils you would leave Price Brothers, you hated the publicity so."

"Pupils, yes."

"Well, Ponola ain't overstocked with folks anxious to pay for being taught. And I thought you would consider half a loaf better'n none. So I told Miss Hinton you played like an angel. You never had given lessons, because there'd never been any call you should; but if she thought it worth her while, to step over about

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

half-past eight o'clock, when you was sure to be at home."

A sharp knock at the front door made both women jump.

"There she is now," said Miss Schultz tumultuously, tumbling over a hassock and her own skirts in her haste to admit Miss Hinton.

Becky awaited the coming of her would-be pupil with the air of an empress about to accord an interview to a suppliant subject.

At least that was the way Amy described her adventure later on to Leslie Cuthbert, who awaited her return in the library across the street.

"Really," she said in conclusion, "you know the girl is simply her brother Oscar feminized. She is just as handsome and quite as imperious."

"I have seen her," said Cuthbert with some asperity. "Where does she come in?"

"In my plan of operations?"

"Yes."

Amy looked at him reflectively, then laughed.

"That sounds sort of 'hands off'; but frankly, I am going to get at the bottom of her reasons for leaving that beautiful home of hers. No one need tell *me* that it was to help pay off a debt. And I have almost worn that poor little

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

wretch of a dressmaker to ravellings, working my way up to Miss Leighton; so don't you go to wet-blanketing me. I think I ought to pay little Miss Schultz two prices for the way I've treated her."

"I wish this snarl could be unravelled without molesting that poor girl," said Cuthbert impatiently.

"So do I, heartily. But it cannot." Amy's voice indicated genuine feeling. "She is to come here to give me lessons, Mr. Cuthbert, three times a week."

"Here?"

"Yes. There is nothing over yonder but jardinières and fashion books. I tried to arrange for an hour that would not interfere with you. But as she said that one pupil would not warrant her giving up her place at Price Brothers, she will have to come to me in the evening, after her work there is done."

"She will not be in my way."

Amy laughed softly.

Cuthbert flushed at the wordless taunt and said:

"But are you quite sure you can impose the fiction of your ignorance on her? She may have heard you play."

"If she makes any reference to having heard

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

the piano over here, I shall tell her it was you," said Amy with calm audacity.

Cuthbert got up abruptly and went over to the firm's desk.

"By the way, do you remember asking me if I knew whether Fred had ever had any entanglement with a woman?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wrote back to Gregory to find out if he could tell me something on that score, and, also, by whom the mortgage on Frogneck had been held, or rather is held."

"Well?"

"Well, Gregory writes me that the firm of Whitmore & Clarkson holds the mortgage, and I happen to know that Whitmore's name is George."

"Then we've found 'dear George.'"

"Yes. And he also sends me this." From the letter he had taken from a pigeon-hole in the desk Cuthbert extracted a circular photograph, small enough to have been fitted snugly into the lid of a man's watch. He put the photograph into Amy's hand.

"Gregory writes me that he dined with Uncle Bates a day or two before my letter came, and while there a parcel arrived for him by express. It contained poor Fred's watch, studs, cuff-

MISS SCHULTZ'S MILD MALICE

buttons, and pocket-book. There was no clue to the sender. It had been expressed from New Orleans."

"Then after all," said Amy, with glad eagerness, "he did leave Frogneck alive."

"That does not prove it."

"No, nothing is proven yet."

She dropped her eyes on the bit of circular pasteboard in her hand.

"And this was among his effects?"

"It was pasted inside his watch-case. It shows good taste in the selection of a sweetheart."

"It is beautiful," said Amy absently; "such a pure, sweet face, and her wavy hair grows down upon her temples in such a lovely fashion. There is something strangely familiar about her eyes and mouth. I've seen those eyes. Where have I seen them?"

"I cannot guess. But this makes one point clear. There is a woman in the case."

"There most generally is," said Amy, yawning ostentatiously and getting up to retire. "I want to sleep on it," she added, "and see if my ideas will clarify themselves through dreams. Good-night."

Quite half an hour later the girl stood in front of her looking-glass, brushing her soft brown

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

hair for the night. A tenderly pitying look softened her bright eyes, making her all womanly.

“I sha’n’t give you away, Princess Olivia; no, my dear, not until I know more about this miserable business than I do yet.”

She smiled reassuringly at the bit of paste-board which she had propped up against the ruffled pin-cushion on her dressing-table.

XI

OSCAR INVADDES HIS MOTHER'S HERMITAGE ONLY TO FIND THE STORM-SIGNAL HOISTED

ONE must needs have sojourned much longer at Frogneck than had either the unfortunate Bartlett or Miss Hinton to have properly gauged its capaciousness or its architectural vagaries.

Connected with the main building by a glass-enclosed corridor was a wing comprising three handsome rooms. Into these rooms had gradually been transferred their full holding capacity of all that was most valuable and comfortable in the way of furnishings that the old mansion could afford.

The corridor was flower-lined, making a lane of vivid beauty and exhaling sweetness through which one must pass who would crave audience of Madam Dangerfield Leighton.

In this handsome hermitage, a self-elected exile, the mistress of Frogneck passed her days in sombre isolation, an embittered, proud old

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

woman, who punished the world for refusing to bow to her imperious will, by excluding all of it that she could.

Her sons Edward and Oscar paid their respects to her formally morning and night. She had ceased inquiring for Becky, since a fiction of her absence at the Boston Conservatory of Music had been successfully imposed upon her.

In her palmy days, when Frogneck had been the accepted centre of all that was best and brightest in the social life of the county, Madam Dangerfield Leighton, surrounded by her three handsome sons, was a proud and happy mother.

Rebecca—"a nut-brown troublesome little thing, a mere girl"—had not ministered to her pride of possession in those soul-satisfying days.

Some one once filled the cup of her self-satisfaction brimming full by calling her "the mother of the Gracchi."

Of all her "jewels," Dick, "the vagabond-gentleman," had been esteemed by her the brightest and most precious. Her partiality for him was a matter of local discussion.

Said old Jarvis Grayson, "It is because he has her own infernal temper and diabolical beauty that she loves him best."

And Jarvis Grayson, being her own first cousin, was not likely to malign her.

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

Richard "went wrong," and the machinery that moved the universe stopped suddenly and completely for his haughty mother. She turned her back on a world that had witnessed her defeat. Time, too, seemed to have stopped at her mandate. At least, he had not dared lay his hand on her statuesque figure, or whiten the glistening black hair that made her seem more a contemporary of Oscar's than his mother.

"Perhaps," said Teddy, in a burst of unfilial spite, "if we could all shunt every responsibility off upon somebody else's shoulders, we could keep from turning gray, too."

They were sitting in Oscar's office—his "worry-den," Teddy called it—with the morning's mail scattered over the long table between them. Oscar smiled at the boy's impetuosity.

"I see no signs of whitening locks on your temples."

"No, but I see plenty of them on yours."

"Oh, that goes for nothing."

Oscar flung his head back impatiently and set himself to a second reading of a letter that had come to him that morning. In the first outburst of his irritation at its contents, he had declared that

"The managing of this estate is enough to turn a man gray in his teens."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

To which Teddy had acceded with the afore-said amendment. After a second reading of the irritating letter, Leighton folded it up and placed it in his breast-pocket:

"I shall have to talk this over with mother," he said, expanding his chest as a swimmer might preparatory to a plunge in very cold water.

Teddy looked at him sympathetically.

"I would rather it should be you than me, old boy, but I will do it in your stead, if you think I can manage it."

"Thanks, my boy, but there are some ordeals one must pass through alone."

"Such as death or whooping-cough," said Teddy, giving the matter a flippant turn, by way of throwing off his depression. Adding, in a burst of generous wrath:

"It is a cussed shame, Oscar, that all the troubles which come to this doomed household should be poured out directly on your head. And you're the only one in the lot deserving of a better fate."

This boyish outburst evoked one of Leighton's rare sweet smiles.

"Since I displayed such poor judgment as to come into the world ahead of my brothers, I must pay the penalty of seniority. Don't worry about me, Ted. If you have nothing in particu-

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

lar to take you out, and want to know the result of my interview, wait for me here."

"Better take Melly with you."

"Why?"

"I saw her out in the garden a while back, looking like a little white-winged butterfly. She was gathering roses, with Mammy's assistance. The child is a regular little beauty. If mother saw more of her it might have a humanizing effect."

"Perhaps you are right," said Oscar reflectively, and, touching a hand-bell on his desk, he ordered the child to be brought to him.

She fluttered into the room in glad response. Oscar was her dearly beloved. She ran to him with a gay little laugh, a pretty combination of starched white skirts, tangled yellow curls, lovely blue eyes, and tender rosy lips. Her tiny hands were clasped about a huge bunch of pink roses.

"Mammy says I ought to take these to my gra'ma, because she likes roses."

"That settles it," said Oscar, swinging the child up to his shoulder, where she perched in smiling triumph.

"That ought to be disarming," said Teddy, "but there's no knowing."

"No, there's no knowing," said Oscar from

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

the doorway. "Just look over that last account of sales for me, will you, Ted?"

And while Teddy applied himself to the commission merchant's report, Oscar went to meet his mother in an interview that promised nothing agreeable.

As soon as he opened the door leading into the flower-lined corridor, he recognized that the hour was not auspicious. Teddy would have said "the storm-signal was hoisted."

Madam Leighton was pacing the corridor slowly, with clasped hands folded about a heavy ebony cross suspended by a black ribbon from her neck. The train of her long black satin gown swished softly across the oilclothed floor as she moved. The smooth white mull kerchief folded in Quaker fashion over her full round bosom seemed never guilty of crease or wrinkle.

At the sound of the door opening behind her, she turned abruptly and came to a standstill under the shining foliage of a tubbed palm.

Her great black eyes were fastened on her son, or rather on the pretty burden he carried on his shoulder, with smouldering dislike. Oscar advanced towards her, pretty much as he would have charged in face of a loaded cannon. His "Good morning, mother," carried an amount of cheerful sound that did not emanate from

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

his heart. He was distinctly nervous and prospectively unhappy.

Madam Dangerfield Leighton's voice had that exquisite modulation which never fails a thoroughly high-bred woman. It was her eyes that did the execution whenever she saw fit to make her displeasure felt:

"Good morning, my son." She turned her eyes from him and the child to fasten them upon a pink oleander just bursting into bloom. "I am afraid my oleanders are not doing so well this year."

"Melly has brought you some very pretty roses," said Oscar, putting the child upon her feet, near enough for her to touch the slender white hand hanging stiffly by the lady's side.

Mrs. Leighton recoiled as if a reptile had come in contact with her flowing satin draperies. The uplifted tender blue eyes of the little one failed of effect. In a tone of intense bitterness the proud old woman turned on Oscar:

"What brutal instinct made you bring her here to-day of all days in the year? Take her away—send her away. I will not be tortured by her to-day—Richard's birthday."

"Tortured by her?" Oscar laid one hand tenderly on the shining head of the child. "Mother, open your heart to her, and I am sure

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

she will pour nothing but a blessed balm into it."

"Take her away, or—rather—"

She did not finish the sentence. With a swirl of her silken draperies she turned on her heel, and glided rapidly out of sight through the lane of bright geraniums and fragrant jessamines. Reaching her sitting-room door she opened it and passed beyond it to the inner room. Oscar could tell by the soft tinkling of brass rings against a brass rod that she had drawn the plush portières behind her. With a sigh he bent over the child, who stood wondering at her repulse. She lifted shy, humid eyes to his face.

"My gra'ma does not want my pretty roses."

He lifted her to the level of his own pitying eyes, and kissing her very tenderly, slowly retraced his steps as far as the door leading into the main building. Then he put her down:

"Now, little one, take your pretty roses to Teddy and tell him to put them into water for Oscar. Oscar loves you and he wants your roses."

The flower-like face grew bright and warm under his words, and with curls and ribbons all aflutter she ran to do his bidding.

Lingering among the flowers in the corridor

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

long enough to gain command of himself, Leighton retraced his steps. His face grew harder as he lost sight of the little flying feet. He muttered to himself, as he approached his mother's door:

"She visits the sins of the father upon the child with merciless severity."

The sight that met his eyes when he had penetrated beyond the plush portières, although a familiar one, had a peculiarly irritating effect on him that morning. Reclining in a large basket-chair, with her head resting on a crimson silk cushion, his mother had submitted her long thick braids of shining black hair to Suzanne's ministration.

On a table close to her elbow was a package of new books that had arrived by the same mail that had brought him that disturbing letter.

A blue basket-woven jar of East Indian preserves stood by the books. A picture-dealer's catalogue lay on her lap. The light from the large windows had been subdued by dropping the soft Madras curtains. Ease and luxury everywhere.

His mother was the handsome self-centred nucleus of this quietly luxurious picture. A jarring chord vibrated in Leighton's sorely tried soul. It was almost with acerbity that he said:

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Mother, can you dispense with Suzanne for a while? I want to discuss a matter of business with you."

She looked at him haughtily, then ordered Suzanne to coil her hair and leave the room.

"My head aches, and Suzanne was relieving it; but if there is no one but a nerve-shattered woman to look after estate matters, I suppose I must submit."

Ignoring the unjust taunt, he answered her very gently:

"I am sorry your head aches, and I will be as brief as possible."

"Well?" she said imperiously, as soon as Suzanne had disappeared noiselessly beyond the portière.

"Shall we go into your cabinet, mother? What I have to say must be for your ears alone."

"As well here as anywhere. Suzanne has closed the outer door. Miss Rittenhouse will not be with me until after luncheon. By the way, what have you all done to that poor girl?"

Oscar paled perceptibly, but remained mute:

"She is a changed creature lately. I was very fond of her. She reads beautifully, is well informed on a variety of topics; was an ideal companion, refined, chatty, cheerful. Latterly she

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

is about as cheerful as Lady Macbeth contemplating the damned spot that would not out."

"A most ghastly simile," said Oscar coldly. "I am not here to discuss Miss Rittenhouse, mother. If she no longer suits you, dismiss her. In point of fact, it may soon come to that."

Madam Leighton raised herself and sat rigidly upright in her basket-chair. She did not take dictation kindly. "May soon come to what?"

"That you will have to dismiss her because you cannot afford to retain her."

"Afford! This is incomprehensible. This is insufferable. Since the day I married your father, a gallant retired naval officer, but a most unpractical man, and brought him home to my plantation, up to the present hour of your most unsatisfactory administration, I have never yet been told that I could not afford what I wanted. And permit me to say, Oscar, that I do not propose to be told so now." Her accents were as soft and sweet as a lute. "Miss Rittenhouse suits me in every particular, although recently she has been much depressed. I shall raise her salary. I shall tell her so to-day."

This imperious defiance, flung at him in a moment when he was harassed and perplexed by accumulating troubles, fired Oscar to a directness that had a touch of brutality in it. Passing

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

over in silence her cruel taunt touching his own administration of affairs, he flung a bombshell straight at her haughty head:

“Mother, when you bribed old Jacob Dingley to disappear with his daughter, my brother’s wife, while Richard was in New Orleans, how much did you agree to pay him annually?”

A man of less nerve would have quailed before the blazing wrath in her eyes. “How dare you?” she said in a smothered voice.

He looked at her almost pityingly.

“I dare, because I must. That ill-advised action of yours—to give it no harsher name—has almost ruined us; and if I am to save the roof over your head, I must take this matter into my own hands. I have avoided it heretofore for reasons that need no explanation. I have contented myself with honoring your checks. I have seen that they have steadily been growing in size. Mother, can you not intrust this matter to me? Let me deal with this man as man with man.”

After that one stifled exclamation she had closed her burning eyes, and lay back in her chair like one exhausted. One of her delicate blue-veined hands lay outstretched upon the table by her side. Oscar laid his hand on it caressingly.

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

"Trust me, mother, before it is too late. You are being blackmailed, I am sure of it, but your cruel reticence has prevented my helping you. I have come in here to-day to talk to you as your business man. I am only your agent, only appointed by you with full power of attorney to administer affairs to the best of my ability, but I cannot see you ruining the estate without letting you know you are doing it."

She flung his hand off as if it stung her.

"Ruining the estate?" she said sharply.

"You and Richard—yes. Mother, I shall refuse to honor any more drafts in favor of Jacob R. Dingley."

"You will refuse to honor *my* drafts?"

"In justice to my brothers and my sister—to protect you, mother, yes."

"But my word of honor is at stake, boy."

"For what? To what did you pledge yourself? Remember, mother, how persistently you have refused to discuss this matter with me. You have never been frank with me. The time has come when you must be."

"Must?"

"Must."

Mother and son measured each other for the first time—for the first time met face to face, soul to soul. He had always extended towards

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

her a childish reverence. She had always held him a "lightweight."

Her verbal estimate had been:

"Oscar is a good boy, amiable and tractable. He has never given me any trouble, but he is neutral-tinted. I am proud of his beauty, that is all. Richard has twice his nerve and character. He is the sort of boy a mother can exult in."

"Why this sudden demand for my confidence?" she asked, dropping her eyes before his fearless gaze.

"Because the lack of it has resulted already in grave trouble, and I must know just how this wretched contract stands in order to avert worse. Perhaps your lack of consideration has partially resulted from my unwillingness to press money matters on your attention. I have saved you too long, mother. The time has come when you must hear the truth."

"I am ready to hear it now."

"You knew, of course, that my father left a mortgage on Frogneck."

"Certainly. He was a spendthrift gentleman. Dick was his counterpart. Everybody's plantation is mortgaged."

Oscar smiled bitterly. He was reaping the whirlwind sown by these two spendthrift gentlemen.

THE STORM SIGNAL HOISTED

"Owing to your unaccountable drain on the estate, mother, I have been unable to pay the interest on the mortgage for the past two years."

"The place used to be able to meet all of its obligations." She lifted her fine brows superciliously.

"That was before it had to supply funds to a blackmailer."

"Oscar !"

"Mother !"

"Did you come here to insult me ?"

"I came here to save you. I came here to tell you that we are threatened with foreclosure."

"Foreclosure !" She had grown ghastly pale. She rested her elbow heavily on the table by her side. "Who holds the mortgage ?"

Oscar put his hand into his breast-pocket, and drew out the letter that had made this interview imperative.

"It was in the hands of a firm. It has very recently changed hands. It is now held by a woman."

"A woman ?"

"Miss Florence Dingley, of Chicago."

"Florence Dingley !"

"That is the name as I read it." With a

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

bitter little laugh, he laid the letter open before her.

She read it, and turned haggard eyes on him.

"That—was—her—name!"

"That was her name," Oscar repeated slowly, and turned his face in another direction.

He could not look upon his mother's humiliation.

XII

HE ALSO HAS AN AGITATING INTERVIEW WITH MISS RITTENHOUSE

WHEN next they looked at each other there was a hint of surrender in her eyes, unutterable sympathy, born of a pity almost divine, in his.

She laced her long slim fingers in and out of each other with nervous energy. The jewels that glittered on them would have paid the interest on the Frogneck debt twice over. Her fine black brows came together in a pucker of perplexity.

"I can't understand it at all. They were paupers—pensioners on my bounty."

"Chicago is a place of miraculous possibilities. One may be a pauper there one week, a millionaire the next if he has any 'climb' in him. You furnished your pensioners with a ladder to climb up by. They have used it, that is all."

She bowed her head on her clasped hands

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

with an audible groan. He waited. Presently she lifted her voice querulously:

"Where is he?"

"My brother Richard? I do not know. He is a homeless wanderer, with but one object in life. You remember his vow?"

"Never to sleep under this roof until she was found?"

"Yes. He is keeping it to the letter. He came here some months ago, slinking in like a thief in the night—the night of that last savage thunder-storm. He went to old man Nathan's cabin, and sent for me about midnight; or, rather, he notified me of his presence by a signal he had selected—fired a single pistol-shot from the carriage-house window."

"What did he want?"

"Money," said Oscar bitterly. "What else should he want of me?"

"And you gave it to him?"

"Of course."

"Yes, of course." A look of wistful longing battled with the gloom in her eyes, as she asked, almost pleadingly:

"How does he look, Oscar?"

"As beautiful as a Greek god. This wandering open-air life he lives has developed him superbly. I never saw a handsomer man."

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

Madam Leighton flung out her hands with a gesture of passionate despair. A wail of maternal longing and love escaped her proud lips:

“ Richard, my son, my son ! ”

Oscar had long since realized that his birth-right of love and tenderness had been wrested from him by this handsome prodigal, but it cost him a fresh pang to note how exclusively his mother dwelt upon herself and upon Richard amid the sea of troubles that were threatening them as a family.

“ How long did he stay ? ” she asked plaintively.

“ Long enough to involve me in a farther obligation of one hundred and twenty-five dollars.”

“ To whom ? ”

“ Dale. Dick discovered Black Prince in the stable: a man had ridden him out here from Ponola, on business. He mounted him and rode him, in his old break-neck fashion, I suppose. The ground was slippery from the rain, and the brute broke a leg. I had to shoot him and to pay Dale for him.”

“ And Richard ? ”

“ Disappeared, as usual, after making trouble for others.”

“ What did the man say ? ”

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Nothing," Oscar answered grimly. "He left in another way."

But his mother's mind had already reverted exclusively to Richard.

"If you know where he is you might communicate her whereabouts to him."

"Might do *what*, mother?"

She resented the incredulity of his voice:

"Remember that I did not know or, rather, did not believe that she was his lawfully married wife when—"

She stopped. It was hard to criticise her own unjustifiable action at this late day, still harder to place herself on the defensive before Oscar. He finished the sentence for her:

"When you worked on the cupidity of her drunken old father and convinced him that he would make more by taking her away than by staying here to fight for her rightful position in the family. Mother, it was an unworthy act."

"Worthy or unworthy, it is done. If you can communicate her whereabouts to him, it may be remedied. If you knew where he was—"

"But I do not. He rarely ever writes. Merely turns up in this stealthy fashion, like a thief in the night. Naturally he does not care to have Ponola tongues set wagging."

Madam Leighton echoed the word "natu-

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

rally," and shuddered. The bitterest drop in her cup was the reflection that Richard had actually wedded one of the low plebeians of that frivolous village.

" Did you tell him how I suffer, Oscar ? "

" He did not ask about you, mother."

" Did not ask about me ? "

" No, madam. Frankly, mother, I think the cruel strategy by which you robbed him of his wife and child is still unforgiven."

" Did you tell him that I had taken the child ? "

" Yes. And he seemed glad that it was here, but expressed no gratitude, simply said that as soon as he had discovered his wife's hiding-place he would relieve us of the child; for no power on earth could make him believe that Florence was voluntarily absenting herself."

" Fool, infatuated fool ! "

" Perhaps so. She is his lawfully married wife nevertheless, and he is loyal to her. But to get back to the immediate snarl in hand."

" Go on," she said wearily, with relaxed attention.

" I think the gravity of the situation warrants my going in person to see the party who holds this mortgage."

" To see *her* ? "

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"To see the person who holds Frogneck by the throat."

"What to do?"

"That I cannot say at this moment or at this distance. But in order to make any step I may take for the benefit of the estate legal and binding, mother, my power of attorney must be extended and strengthened—must be made absolute."

"Make it as binding as you please. I do not care. I am so tired, Oscar, so utterly weary of my life. Oh, the bitterness of knowing yourself an unloved mother!"

"Mother, if you had not given your heart to Dick, to the unnatural exclusion of every other filial demand, you would not have cause to call yourself an unloved mother. As for myself, I have not one word to say. I shall not plead for what should be mine inalienably. Edward, a warm-hearted lad, true as steel, loving-hearted as a girl, you have chilled and thrown back upon himself, until he dreads to approach you. Rebecca, poor girl, never knew a mother's care or caresses."

"I hope she is happy at the Conservatory. It was always her dream. Does she write often?"

"Never—that is, lately."

"Perhaps she is too busy—too much taken

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

up with her musical studies." She bestowed a placating smile on him. "I was always proudest of my boys. I expected them to shed lustre on their father's name. I wanted the world to hear of them—to know that they were mine! Rebecca was a good child, and I hope she is happy. I must write to her."

He looked at her with contracted brows:

"Mother, does it not strike you as a strange state of affairs that you, our only parent, should be leading the life of a recluse in your own home, unacquainted with the workings of your own household?"

She flashed a resentful look at him:

"Enough of this. I am in no mood to be taken to task. Kindly make out the power of attorney to suit yourself, and bring it to me to sign. All I ask is to be allowed to end my most unhappy life under this roof, where I first saw the light. I am too tired, my son, to talk any longer this morning."

Her final words of dismissal were gently spoken, and she put out a conciliating hand. There was something in the sustained sadness of Oscar's expression that touched her to a tardy remorse.

He got up quickly and, bending over her, dropped a perfunctory kiss on her forehead. He

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

turned away from her with a sigh. The ordeal was over, but his burden of responsibility was in no way lessened.

As he reached the portière, she sent a question after him:

“When shall you leave for Chicago?”

“As soon as I can put plantation matters in such shape as shall give Teddy a minimum of vexation. He is willing, but inexperienced.”

Question and answer fell upon a third pair of ears with startling effect:

Miss Rittenhouse, opening the outer door quietly, with her accustomed consideration for Mrs. Leighton's somnolent habits, framed her pallid face in the doorway at that moment.

She and Leighton came face to face in the anteroom. Time had been when, thus meeting her, he would have had a courteous word or a smile for her in passing. His eyes rested upon her briefly. Their expression was inscrutable, or, if not inscrutable, only to be accounted for in one way.

“Impossible, absolutely impossible,” she said to herself with a sobbing breath. She flung off the sense of physical pain that had seized upon her, and passed noiselessly into Madam Leighton's presence.

At her approach Mrs. Leighton lifted herself

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

almost heavily from her chair. She was pale, and dark rings had planted themselves about her eyes since the beginning of that most vexatious day.

"Shall it be 'Romola' or embroidery?" Olivia asked, throwing off her own depression by a violent effort and smiling bravely.

"Neither. I am not equal to either this morning. I feel tired, old, and worn. Oscar has been here, teasing me about money matters, as if I knew or cared to know anything about his miserable plantation worries. When I was a girl, the women of a family were treated like queens. The men bore all the burdens. And Captain Leighton never tormented me about mortgages and powers of attorney and Heaven knows what. Ah, but there were men in those days!"

She sighed heavily and shifted the rings on her left hand, having inadvertently placed an emerald above an amethyst, which combination displeased her.

Miss Rittenhouse looked at the beautiful sybarite with darkening eyes. She had not been a member of this strange household three years without coming to know who bore the heat and burden of all its perplexities. And what quiet manly endurance Oscar brought to

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

bear upon a lot that would have tested the nerves of a stoic !

She busied herself arranging in the rose-bowl on Madam Leighton's book-table the fresh flowers she had brought in with her. There was an infinitely touching pallor on her smooth oval cheeks and in the drooping corners of her beautiful mouth. The hermit was not without her generous impulses. She leaned forward and laid her hand on her companion's shoulder:

"And yet, my dear, I know that money matters are sometimes very importunate. Now, I have seen that something is pressing heavily on your mind of late. I—excuse me, if I sound coarse—if the salary we agreed upon is not sufficient, you have but to express your wishes—and—"

The pallor on Miss Rittenhouse's cheeks deepened. She put out both hands imploringly:

"Oh, pray, pray, stop ! I am so sorry if I have given you any reason to think me dissatisfied. My home is all that I could ask—far more than I dared hope for when I came South. As for money, my salary is most munificent. I was just thinking—just wishing—I mean that—"

"Well ?"

She had come to such an abrupt stop, and

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

seemed to experience so much difficulty in getting started again, that Madam Leighton's "Well?" was not uncalled for.

"Frankly, Mrs. Leighton, you have almost made me feel as if to discuss ways and means were coarse and sordid. We do not take such sublimated views of finance in my country."

"It was not recognized as a polite topic when I was a girl. But everything is sadly changed. Go on, say whatever you have a mind to. The subject may be coarse, but you never can be, my dear."

"Thank you. What I wanted to say was this. I have seen for some time past that Mr. Leighton was depressed. You tell me that he has been 'teasing' you about money matters. Do you think—would he mind, dear Mrs. Leighton, if I offered to lend him some—of course at the very highest legal rate of interest?"

"You?"

Miss Rittenhouse colored painfully.

"I did not want to be impertinent. Only, as I have several thousand dollars lying idle—you see, really here I cannot spend money, and if he would use it—"

Madam Leighton waved the disagreeable topic aside with a lofty sweep of her white hand.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"There—there, spare me, my dear girl. It is very kind of you, and I cannot undertake to say how my son would answer you. As for me, I believe we left Tito just getting into a fresh scrape. What infinite patience Romola has with him!"

Thus delicately counselled to stand aloof from the Leighton family affairs, Olivia took up the book and resumed the story of Romola.

An hour later she passed through the flower-lined corridor on her way to her own room. Melly's morning lessons were still to be gone through. Failing to discover the child in her usual haunts, she started towards the garden in search of her. The door of Leighton's study stood open. Involuntarily she glanced in. As motionless as a graven image, with one hand supporting his head, he sat at his desk, with his back towards the open door.

He was in trouble. Without waiting to take counsel with prudence or propriety, Olivia glided swiftly through the door, closing it after her. Now she must do it, she told herself with a gasp of fright.

The sound of the closing door brought Leighton out of his reverie. He stood up to receive her. She lifted pleading eyes to his face.

"Please, please, don't think me dreadfully

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

bold, Mr. Leighton, but I have come in here to ask a favor of you."

He answered unsmilingly:

"I hope it is one that I can grant."

"Easily, very easily."

"Pray be seated, and lay your commands on me."

Unshed tears made her eyes exceedingly bright. He had not always treated her with this frozen courtesy.

Time had been when, almost at her will, she could evoke that strange fleeting smile that lighted up the dark beauty of his face so magically.

"Please don't be angry—but you are in trouble."

Something very like a sneer curled his lips.

"Your astuteness is phenomenal."

"Ah, I beseech you not to deal with me sneeringly. I, too, have my sorrows and perplexities."

"Yes?"

She dropped her eyes before the inscrutable look in his.

"But I came in here to make a business proposition to you. Mr. Leighton—I—I—gather that you are, as planters often are—worried for ready cash. I should like to invest

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

some money I have lying idle. Would five thousand dollars be of any service to you ? ”

“ Immense. But—” he fixed her with a searching look—“ pardon me: then your acceptance of this situation was not a matter of necessity ? ”

“ No—yes. There are various sorts of necessity. I wanted to come South—for my health.”

“ Which has always seemed perfect.”

She moved restlessly. His eyes burned her. What did he suspect ?

“ Could you make use of this money, Mr. Leighton ? ”

“ I could, quite comfortably.”

“ And will you ? Perhaps it may save you a trip to Chicago ? ”

“ I have no desire to forego that trip. There are other matters than estate matters that demand my attention.”

He had been looking at her almost intently during the entire interview. He turned now and busied himself with some papers on his desk, as he added:

“ It has come to my ears that active inquiries are afoot touching the whereabouts of that man who came here on the night of the big storm to see me on business.”

OSCAR AND MISS RITTENHOUSE

“ And you—what do you know—about—him ? ”

“ Much—much more than any one suspects.”

She got up impulsively, made a step forward, moaned, and fell in an unconscious heap at his feet.

He picked her up and carried her in his arms to her own room. There he laid her on the lounge and rang the bell for Suzanne.

“ My God,” he said to himself when he regained the library, “ how these fragile women can suffer and yet make no sign ! ”

XIII

MISS HINTON CONCLUDES THAT THE SUCCESS OF
THE EXPEDITION IS THREATENED BY
TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

"FRANKLY, Mr. Cuthbert," said Miss Hinton, gently wrinkling her pert little nose with an ivory paper-cutter, "the success of this expedition is threatened by too much Leighton. I confess to a suffusion of Leighton on the brain, and you begin to show every symptom of emotional insanity."

Cuthbert reddened and laughed nervously. The "firm" was in consultation.

"How?" he asked.

"By secreting yourself here in the library every evening that Miss Leighton comes over to give me my music-lesson, and then presumptuously making believe to *me* that you came in accidentally just as she was leaving, and kept quiet so as not to disturb the music."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

"That is the problem of the hour. If we mean business—"

"Which we do, most emphatically."

"Which we do, most commercially."

"Then ?"

"Let us stop playing with edged tools. Perhaps you had better forego the pleasure of—"

"Looking at her lovely profile, listening to her admirable music, and—"

"Adoring her silently," Amy finished his sentence for him, with a malicious little laugh.

"Come, my dear fellow, don't let us try to hoodwink each other. Let us reserve our sharp-shooting for the enemy."

"The enemy ! Poor little white-souled dove !"

"Thy speech bewrayeth thee. But I know just exactly how you feel. When Teddy looks at me with those great limpid eyes of his, and utters one of his inane compliments, dear innocent, I feel like crying aloud to him that I am a vicious underhanded wretch, not deserving one kind thought from him. Honestly, I am almost tempted to throw the whole business to the winds."

Cuthbert looked at her coldly:

"Is that a woman's idea of a business contract ?"

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Oh, I did not say I was going to do it, only that I felt like it."

"I thought you had strong hopes of fastening suspicion on some one else than Leighton?"

"I thought so, too."

"You are confoundedly slow in producing your 'some one else.'"

"You are becoming dreadfully irritable. That is one of the symptoms of love-sickness, I suppose."

"You are an exasperating minx, Amy."

"Perhaps. Also an indispensable one to you at this particular juncture. Mr. Leighton—Teddy—walked home from church with me last night. I am so glad his sister goes to the Presbyterian Church."

"Well, did the walk amount to anything more than a peripatetic flirtation?"

"Much more. I never allow myself to lose sight of what we are here for. After I go away he can loathe my memory to his heart's content. I shall have a thousand dollars in my pocket and be on my way to a Paris art-school." She sighed, then added curtly:

"Oscar Leighton is going away."

"The deuce he is!"

"So his brother informed me. He is simply

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

boiling over with pride, dear child, at having the management of affairs left on his hands for an indefinite length of time."

" 'Indefinite length of time.' That looks ugly. I am afraid we shall have to ask Mr. Leighton to postpone his trip. We cannot let him go."

" If we mean business, we must not let him go," said Amy slowly. " If we mean—"

Cuthbert interrupted her bluntly:

" We mean nothing but business."

" Of course. There's old Masterton's money. But then you are already a wealthy man, and you really did not love your cousin Fred."

She looked at him with cool defiance. He flushed hotly. Her arguments were all for " throwing up their hands."

" My uncle's money is by no manner of means the only thing involved. I may as well make a clean breast of it. He has had the cruelty to hint that I know more about my cousin's death than I am willing to avow. It is my good name I am battling for."

" What an old wretch your uncle Masterton must be ! Pity he is so dreadfully rich."

" When did Leighton say his brother would start ? "

" The latter part of this week."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"We have no time to lose."

"What steps can you take to stop him?"

"I shall consult a lawyer after—" He took out his watch.

"After what?"

"After my interview with Mr. Thomas Cleggett. I am to meet that bibulous gentleman at three o'clock."

"Where? Not here?"

"No, at his own house. He has hinted several times in my hearing that, if he chose to speak out, the Leighton pride would have a tumble, and they would not carry themselves so 'loftysome.' When I have commented on his hints to others, the invariable answer is that 'old Cleggett is a tipsy imbecile whom nobody ever listens to,' but I propose that this same 'tipsy imbecile' shall put his dark hints into plain English, and then it will be for me to determine their value."

Amy got up from her chair reluctantly. She almost dreaded having him probe this matter any deeper.

"I suppose you will report verbally, or make an entry when you get back?"

"I shall report verbally, if you are on hand. It is a heathenish hour to tramp out to his shanty on the outskirts of town, but he wanted

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

'the thing over and done with before Jennie left the store.' "

"Who is Jennie?"

"That sick girl in whom Miss Leighton took so much interest—her fellow clerk."

"Oh, I remember now. Wouldn't it be a malicious freak of Destiny if that poor child Rebecca should be the one to put an important clue into your hands? What a queer world this is! She goes, out of the goodness of her heart, to see this sick girl, meets her drunken father by the roadside, tries to play the part of good Samaritan. You come to her aid, and—are put on the trail that may lead her brother to the gallows! Moral, never do a kind thing to a drunkard fallen by the wayside."

Cuthbert went out with her scoffing laugh ringing in his ears. What did she mean by thus holding the case before his eyes? Was she taunting him with weighing a growing passion against the settled purpose of solving a mystery?

It was all a confounded snarl, into which the farther he penetrated the more entangled he was likely to find himself.

Jennie Cleggett, granted an early release by reason of her palpable weakness and Becky's offer to look after her notion department, hur-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

ried homeward, that same afternoon, bent upon making things look "cosey for father."

With that futile self-accusing so many women are given to, she said to herself, as she had oftentimes said before:

"Perhaps if I were a better daughter he would be a better father."

She entered softly by the back door. If he was at home at all, he would be dozing in the big chintz chair in the best room at about that hour. She stopped on the threshold to listen.

He was at home—and—some one with him ! Visitors were not such an every-day occurrence with the Cleggetts as to make Cuthbert's deep rich voice a matter of no curiosity. She stole closer on tiptoe, and seated herself on the chair nearest the thin wooden partition which divided her room from the "best room."

She drew a long relieved breath. She even smiled. It was not often she had occasion for smiles, poor little drudge.

Her father's voice sounded perfectly sober. Perhaps the other man was somebody come to offer him a job of plastering. Jennie had pleased visions of a divided responsibility as to ways and means. She had a perfect right to listen.

"No, sir," her father was saying, "I've not

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

touched a drop to-day. I promised you I would keep a clear head, and I've done it. What I told you I seen with my own eyes, I seen. You've paid me handsome for telling you the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth, s' help me God, s' far as I seen it. And I'm ready to swear in open court, before judge and jury, to every word I've said. I see you've been takin' notes, sir."

"I have every word of it down in black and white, Cleggett. There must be no going back on your statement."

Jennie's pale face grew sober. Then it was not a matter of plaster or whitewash.

Cleggett answered somewhat nervously:

"That's all right, Colonel; that's just as right as can be. But would you mind reading it out to me? I don't hanker after goin' on record as sayin' one word against a fellow mortal, even be him one of them proud-stomached Leightons, that would help him swing, less'n it was the exact truth."

Jennie started violently and pressed her ear closer to the thin wooden partition. If there was any harm hanging over a Leighton, it should not touch her dear Miss Becky if she had power to avert it.

In all her forlorn work-burdened young life

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Jennie had known but one girl friend. That was Rebecca Leighton. "Not that I'm deservin' of buttoning her shoes," she had once told her father in a burst of appreciation, "but standing behind the same counter has sorter brought us on a level. She's awful good to me."

Tumultuous plans for warding danger from her beloved friend's head coursed through Jennie's puzzled brain as Cuthbert read aloud in his rich mellow voice:

" 'I, Thomas Cleggett, was searching the woods of Frogneck on the ninth day of August, looking for a stray heifer calf that belonged to my girl Jennie, and which she was grievin' the loss of. I wasn't takin' no particular direction, just followin' a cattle-trail wherever I found one, or the tinklin' of a cow-bell whenever I heard one.

" 'Proceeding in this fashion, I found myself a-skirtin' a tumble-down rail fence, with black-berry-bushes and sumach that thick in the corners that I had to push them aside with both hands and trample them down with both feet to make any sorter progress.

" 'I was sorter fetched up with a round turn by hearing voices on the other side of this outer-the-way fence, and, peeping through a thick clump of sassafras-bushes, I seen Oscar

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

Leighton and his old man Nathan, as plain as I see you this minute, a-patting of the earth down on a mound that was shaped mightily like a grave.

“ ‘I laid low, and presently they went ther ways—Nathan with a pick and shovel over his shoulders. They didn’t never look back once. I seen Leighton stick a piece of wood at one end of the mound. When I were reasonably sure they warn’t comin’ back, I clumb the fence to investigate. Then I found I were in a old graveyard belonging to the plantation. Lots of darkeys ben buried there, I reckon. That new mound weren’t much different from any other grave. The stick just had a date on it.

“ ‘I come away purty clear in my mind that Dick Leighton, the best of the whole lot, had pegged out in some out-of-the-way place, and his brother Oscar was putting him away with no more ceremony than if he was a tramp. You see, the Frogneck folks didn’t have no more use for Dick after he married Florence Dingley. Not that she wasn’t as good as him, when you come down to the essentials.

“ ‘Therefore I say, what I’ve said time and time again, that if folks gen’rally knew about that sneaky buryin’ to which I was a uninvited eye-witness, Mr. Oscar Leighton wouldn’t carry

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

himself so loftysome. As there wasn't no law against a man hunting for a stray heifer through the Frogneck lands, I passed out of the old graveyard by another path, and, bein' tolable thirsty by that time, I found my way down to the creek that runs through the place.

" 'As luck would have it, I come out about as near as could be to where the men had landed their burden. I could see ther footprints in the wet sand, and I picked up a pair of men's gloves sorter wadded together by the water.' "

Here the reader stopped to ask a question:

" By the way, Mr. Cleggett, do you happen to have preserved those gloves ? "

Cleggett laughed foolishly.

" Well, sir, I done that same thing. You see, I thought I mout make use of them on some extra-cold day in winter. I ain't got no use in the world for gloves less'n it's cold."

" Could I see them without putting you to much trouble ? " Cuthbert asked politely.

" No trouble in the world, sir. I jus' carries them about in my coat-tail pocket," And without more ado, the plasterer produced a pair of dogskin gloves that had evidently been fit for a fastidious gentleman's wear in their palmy days.

Cuthbert took them and examined them cursorily. His search bore unexpected fruit. On

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

the inner lining of stained white fleece was stamped in black letters F. S. B. He handed the gloves back to Cleggett.

"Thank you. Doubtless you will find them very comfortable on a cold day."

"I don't know what Jennie would say to seein' me rigged out in gloves. Jennie's mighty down on nonsense of any kind, and she's a great one to ask me where I got things. As for the notes, they're all right. I ain't got a single word to take back. But, Colonel, would you mind my asking you just one question in my turn?"

"No; what is it?"

"This business that you're stirring in ain't likely to work no harm to Miss Becky, is it? She's a Leighton, and all them Leightons are a stiff-necked lot, but Miss Becky's been mighty good to my little girl, and I wouldn't hurt a hair of her head for the money twicet over that you've paid me."

In a voice full of feeling Cuthbert answered:

"Neither would I, Claggett, for all the gold that ever was minted. But see here, my friend, I have another condition to impose."

Then Jennie heard the clinking of coin flung upon the hard bare stand in her best room.

"You are to understand that I have bought

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

your information and your silence. If I hear of your breaking faith with me, I shall report you as an accessory after the fact."

"As a what, sir?"

"As a man who has known for months of this thing and failed to report it to the authorities."

"The authorities!" Tom indulged in a burst of derisive laughter. "If there's any authorities in this county that would care to tackle a Leighton on old Tom Cleggett's say-so, I wish you'd trot him out. I do for a fact, sir. But it ain't likely I'll break faith with you, Colonel. Haven't I been knowing all these months what I've just told you, without letting on? I've held my tongue for Miss Becky's sake, sir."

"Then continue to hold it for your own."

A chair was scraped over the bare floor; the outer door opened and shut briskly, and then Jennie could hear the clinking of coin as her father counted his gains. She rose and stretched her cramped limbs.

"And for Miss Becky's sake," she said softly, "I won't hold my tongue."

Swinging rapidly homeward through the byways and narrow streets of the dusty little town, Cuthbert felt a growing irritation at his own conscious vacillation.

Now that he was about to lay his hands on

TOO MUCH LEIGHTON

something tangible and positive touching the fate of his cousin, he shrank from making use of the clue.

And all for the sake of a sweet-faced girl ! She surely had bewitched him. He reflected with satisfaction upon the fact that he had sealed Cleggett's lips.

As he ran lightly up the Robertson house steps, the front door opened and Rebecca came out. They met in the vestibule. She lifted shy eyes to his face.

" I ran over to practise a duet with Miss Hinton. I saw that you were out, for I missed your dog. We must annoy you terribly with our music."

" You never could annoy me," he said gallantly, and then called himself a variety of evil names because his words brought such a pretty flush to her cheeks.

He felt quite sure at that moment that he should never want to use Cleggett's information against Oscar Leighton.

XIV

MISS HINTON TAKES MISS RITTENHOUSE DRIVING WITH RATHER STARTLING RESULTS

THE general impression existing at Price Brothers' was that Miss Leighton, being considered "a drawing card," was not amenable to any very rigid regulations. This impression became conviction when she was seen to approach the floor-walker, hat in hand, and coolly inform him she should have to leave for the day, when the clock had just struck three !

The floor-walker obsequiously hoped that Miss Leighton was not going to be ill, and officiously accompanied her as far as the door and raised her parasol for her.

"The coolness of her !" said the ribbon clerk to the stocking lady.

But "the coolness of her," poor child, was a brave assumption for the benefit of others. When she stepped out into the street, she wondered if the very dogs in the gutters could not

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

see that her face was blanched with fear and her limbs trembling beneath her. Her heart was like lead in her bosom, and her brain seemed spinning round in a wild perplexity.

Between the selling of a lace collar to her kinswoman, Mrs. Jarvis Grayson—who, by the way, never missed an opportunity of vindicating family pride by snubbing Becky and treating her exclusively as a clerk—and the transfer of a lot of notions across Jane's counter, Jennie had contrived to unburden herself.

"There's something afoot, Miss Becky, that I think you ought to know about. I just can't hold my tongue; but, for pity's sake, don't use what I am going to tell you to poor old father's hurt."

Then she told the story of Cuthbert's visit to her father and what she had heard through the wall. And Rebecca, absently promising that no harm should come to Cleggett, left the store with her brain in a whirl, and her heart beating a frightened tattoo against her ribs.

How could that miserable business which had driven her from her home concern this man who lived in the old Robertson house! And if he was actuated by anything more than idle curiosity touching local affairs in thus prying into it, was not Miss Hinton involved in it, too? Had

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

she, Rebecca Leighton, been made a tool of by these sharp heartless outsiders ?

To be an " outsider," that is, not to have one's ancestral roots planted in Ponola soil, was to merit a certain amount of opprobrium. And whenever Ponola so far forsook its own ideals as to smile upon an outsider who could not even point to a collateral twig of redeeming proportions to show he had a remote ancestral claim, it took credit to itself on the score of magnanimity.

All the pride of a proud race surged into poor little Becky's fast-beating heart with suffocating effect. " That she should have permitted herself to be made a catspaw of ! "

She was shivering as with a physical chill when she reached Miss Schultz's door. She stopped with her hand on the knob to glance at the house across the street. She had learned the custom of the inmates.

Miss Hinton was generally at home, the men were always out, at this time of day. She would go over at once and tell Miss Hinton not to expect any more lessons from her. That done, she could think more clearly about Oscar.

" Miss Hinton was not in, but was looked for at any moment. Would Miss Leighton be pleased to wait ? "

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

And without waiting for Miss Leighton's decision, Hammond threw open the door leading into the parlor, and Becky walked mechanically over the threshold.

The great high-ceilinged room was dark to the point of obscurity. Ponola dust was one of the things Hammond waged relentless war upon. Every shutter was closed, every blind down. Becky groped her way to a chair.

Heretofore she had only visited the house during lamplit hours, and when Amy's bright face and voice lent an added illuminating touch to its severely sombre atmosphere.

After promising to "let Miss Hinton know," Hammond closed the door softly. She was glad of the respite. It would give her time to decide what she should say to Amy, how best annihilate Cuthbert.

She had come to feel a sincere friendship for this dashing alert Northern girl, and the hours she spent with her had been bright threads woven into the very sombre woof of the strange life she was leading. She wanted to part with her pupil in absolute amity. She would not visit upon her head the cruel curiosity that had set Cuthbert to prying into that ghastly secret of Oscar's. But then ought she not to be glad that this dark veil was to be lifted? If this man had

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

a right to pry into this business, was it for her to resent his doing so? Let come what would, she would rejoice at the triumph of truth. Yes, rejoice!

As an earnest of that rejoicing she burst into a passion of convulsive sobbing. The house was very still. She had not heard a footfall since Hammond's receding ones had died away. Not a door had opened or shut. She had the house all to herself. This story of Jane Cleggett's had come upon her with crushing force, just at a time when she had been lulling her excitable imagination to sleep—when she had almost convinced herself that if "anything had really gone wrong at Frogneck some one would have found it out by this time." Some one had, it seemed!

The chair she had flung herself into stood with its high back turned toward the library. Heavy chenille portières hung in stiff folds from the folding doors that divided the two rooms. In her sorrowful self-absorption, Becky had not given a thought to the space beyond those portières.

Seated at his desk, noiselessly writing, Cuthbert had heard the colloquy at the front door absently, and credited it to Amy, in household consultation with the butler.

At sound of these convulsive sobs, however,

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

he poised his pen in mid-air to listen with pained surprise. Whatever could have happened to make the cheery little detective abandon herself to such an outburst? Had old Hinton got drunk? She had forewarned him more than once of such a possibility, and of the risk they ran of exposure at his reckless hands.

The fear—greater now than it would have been a week ago—that Hinton had “given the business away” sent Cuthbert in tumultuous haste through the portières into the obscurity of the parlor, and straight up to the sobbing girl.

“Why, Amy, child, what is it?”

Becky rose precipitately, and turned a frightened tear-stained face towards him. This was a turn of affairs she certainly had not looked for.

Cuthbert held out an apologetic hand and smiled gravely.

“Miss Leighton, how can I apologize? I was sure it was my little friend Miss Hinton in some childish trouble.”

“Miss Hinton is out, Hammond told me.”

It sounded dreadfully lame, but she must say something.

“Hammond doubtless was right. She will be sorry not to have been on hand, but—”

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

In the seconds that had passed since his entrance, Rebecca had formed a daring resolve. She would brave him to his face. She lifted her eyes to Cuthbert's face and said softly:

"Mr. Cuthbert, will you answer absolutely truthfully the question I am about to ask you?"

"I will answer it as a gentleman must," he said, drawing a chair near the one she was sitting in, and encouraging her by a smile.

"It is a very daring question, but I cannot know a moment's peace of mind until I have your answer to it."

"I would give much to secure your peace of mind in all things, at all times," he answered with exceeding gentleness of manner.

"Thank you," she said simply, but her eyes dropped under the bright intensity of his gaze. In all her short and secluded young ladyhood Becky had never been thrown into contact with a man of as much magnetism as Leslie Cuthbert was accredited with even among *blasé* worldlings. Added to his exceptionally pleasing face was a gentle winning manner, that had an almost caressing softness in the present instance.

Taking her resolution bravely in both hands, she came at once to the point:

"I am not good at circumlocution and I detest mystification. Will you tell me, Mr. Cuth-

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

bert, if you are conscious of any deeper motive than idle curiosity about a somewhat unusual sort of people—I mean ‘those strange Leightons,’ as we are called—in prying into the idle story told you by old Mr. Cleggett?”

She was trembling; he never would have suspected it. He was completely taken aback; she did not suspect it. The masks which convention imperatively enjoins have their uses.

It seemed to Rebecca that many moments elapsed before he answered her question. In reality he did so almost immediately.

“May I ask how you know I have held any conference with Mr. Cleggett? It was presumed to be strictly confidential.”

“Jennie went home earlier than usual yesterday. She had one of her bad headaches. She overheard you reading aloud something to her father. Something—something”—the words came chokingly—“that referred to my brother Oscar. I have promised Jennie no harm shall come to her father. Please don’t think he has broken faith with you.”

“It is good of you,” said Cuthbert feelingly, “to think of him at all at such a moment. We will leave him out of the question.”

There was that in his eyes and voice which brought the crowding tears into Becky’s eyes.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

She would not let them fall, but they shone on her long lashes with disturbing effect—disturbing to Cuthbert.

He got up and walked over to the mantel-piece, where he stood with his back turned to her, critically examining a pair of old bronze candelabra. When he had given those shining tears ample time to dry on her long curling lashes, he came back to his chair:

“ I have resolved to tell you the entire truth, Miss Leighton, and then you shall tell me what step to take next.”

“ I ? ”

“ You. Only, you are not to interrupt me, please, until I have quite finished.”

She folded her hands one above the other on her lap. She was quivering in every fibre of her being. Surely he was not going to be cruel enough to ask her to throw any light on this matter ? Then she gave him her undivided attention.

“ I came here with a purpose, Miss Leighton, and until I met you I had the single determination in view of accomplishing that object, and of returning to my Northern home. You did not know you were complicating matters for me, but—you have, very seriously.”

“ I ? How ? ”

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

"I will tell you that later on. My object in coming South was to solve, if possible, a mystery that touches me somewhat nearly. I had a cousin named Bartlett—Frederic S. Bartlett—"

He was not oblivious of the violent start she made, but at the moment a twist in his eyeglass-guard required his close attention.

"I pretend to no especial attachment for him. He was a fast, bad sort of fellow, who had managed to ingratiate himself with a maternal uncle of ours, to the exclusion of my name from the old gentleman's will. His legitimate business was that of a real-estate broker, and he came South to look after the interests of some clients of his. He disappeared suddenly and mysteriously. My offer of a reward for any information concerning his fate led to a letter telling me that he had come to Ponola and left almost immediately for—for the country."

"For Frogneck," said Rebecca, with blanched lips but firm enunciation.

"For Frogneck. In pursuance of the object that brought me South I have, of course, followed up every obtainable clue. The last one, put into my hand by Mr. Cleggett, im—"

He stopped, and that happened which the eye of man had never seen. Leslie Cuthbert stam-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

mered, blushed, and was overwhelmed with confusion !

Rebecca finished the sentence for him without a quaver in her voice:

"Implicates Oscar Leighton."

"You have said it," he answered huskily. Then, by a violent effort, he regained composure and command of his voice.

"Your friend, Miss Cleggett, has told you what her father said. Perhaps you can say it is not true. From my heart I hope you can."

"It is every—word—true, absolutely true."

He looked at her in amazement. Such a slight little body to contain the soul of a Brutus.

"I believe you would go to the stake rather than connive at a wrong," he said impetuously.

She made an impatient gesture with one hand:

"I am not under discussion, please. I should like to ask, if I may, what use will be made of Mr. Cleggett's statement."

"None whatever—if you say so."

She wrinkled her brows in perplexity:

"None whatever if *I* say so ! I don't comprehend you at all."

"It is this way," said Cuthbert recklessly. "I want to wash my hands of the whole miserable business. I cannot bring myself to believe that

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

Oscar Leighton—that your brother could be guilty of—of—”

“Murder? How timid you seem about mere words! I, who have suffered the horror of this mystery for silent months, think less of the words than of the hideous possibility. I love my brother Oscar. I used to reverence him. I believed that honor, justice, and manliness crowned him regally. In the depths of my most miserable heart I find myself acquitting him, saying it is impossible he should have committed a crime. I abase myself in dreams, imploring his pardon for ever having doubted him. I know the Leightons all are fiery and impetuous; something may have goaded him into a terrible act of violence. But then, as a gentleman, he should have avowed it.” She threw out her hands desperately. “Something hideous did happen at Frogneck. I implored him on my knees to explain it to me. He would not. But—but—I cannot—”

She choked, stopped, and buried her face in her palms.

“Spare yourself, I implore you,” said Cuthbert, leaning forward and gently possessing himself of one trembling little hand. “I shall not push this matter. Let the State make its own discoveries, punish its own criminals, if criminal

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

there be; I shall leave for the North to-morrow. I will not take another step in the matter."

She looked at him perplexedly:

"But—why?"

He lifted her hand reverently to his lips and kissed it.

"Because," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "I love the sister of Oscar Leighton. Child, child, can you not see why?"

She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes. Her breath came and went in quick gasps. She towered before him, the embodiment of outraged dignity:

"Love me! You! What a pitiful travesty of a holy thing. Out upon such love! Because your fancy has lightly turned towards the sister of a suspected criminal, you would condone a crime and help to rob justice of its ends! To gratify your own paltry fancy, you would darken the windows your own hands have opened to let in the light. There can be no question of tender parleyings between you and Oscar Leighton's sister. Your words are an insult to me. If the information you have acquired warrants you in laying a crime at Oscar Leighton's door, then do what you came here to do, formally, fearlessly, armed with all the majesty of the law. As for his sister—"

A DRIVE WITH STARTLING RESULTS

He interrupted her passionately:

"But if it all turns out to be a hideous mistake? If Leighton—as I am sure he must—clears himself of suspicion, you will let me—"

"Not another word. Let the future foster its own unborn possibilities."

And before he could put out a detaining hand, she had swept past him, and he could hear the outer door open and close swiftly on her impetuous flight.

Cuthbert wheeled suddenly at sound of a mocking laugh, and, framed in the parted portières, saw Amy's bright face.

"Well, you have played the wild," she said coolly, as she came forward, drawing off her gloves.

He looked at her angrily:

"How long have you occupied the post of eavesdropper?"

"Just long enough to find out what an immense ass a sensible man can sometimes make of himself. I think you have earned Miss Leighton's everlasting contempt."

"Doubtless. I have just made an infernal mess several degrees worse. I am going to let the whole matter go to the devil."

"I am not."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Pray what chimera have you evolved since breakfast-time?"

"I am going to take Miss Rittenhouse out driving."

"Well, what do you expect from that?"

"I will tell you that later on," she said, with a happy imitation of his own voice and manner. Then she let the portières fall, and ran up-stairs humming a love-ditty.

XV

THE LAME MAN UNDERTAKES TO DO A LITTLE BUSINESS ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

MR. JIMMIE DALE, landlord of the Traveller's Rest, in common with a goodly number of his neighbors, fancied that every well-dressed Northern man who "fetched up in Ponola without any particular visible errand thar" could best be entertained by hearing the darkey exploited in all his ramifications.

"'Cause you see for why? If ever I'd a-laid store enough by a lot of black folks to spill my blood for 'em, sight unseen, they'd be considerable of a curiosity to me at closter quarters."

Whether Mr. Hinton accepted his ethics of the great war was something Jimmie had never inquired into. But whenever "the gent which sported crutches" honored the front porch of the Traveller's Rest by planting himself in one of its big splint-bottomed armchairs, "good for three hours and a quart of beer," the landlord cast about in his mind for some not utterly

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

threadbare yarn about the old-time darkey and his unquenchable devotion to his "w'ite folks," by way of entertaining him.

Saturday was always an easy day for Jimmie in the exercise of his duties as local chronicler. On that day the streets of Ponola swarmed with a dark cloud of witnesses to the valor of the Emancipators. It was the great trading-day, when cotton came in—on huge piled-up wains, drawn by well-groomed mules with gayly tinkling bells, or by many yokes of sullen oxen, strong and slow—to be traded off at the numerous retail shops with signal lack of prudence and thrift.

Then Jimmie, with his chair tilted comfortably back against a post, could explain the passing show to his Northern guest with zest and humor. On the Saturday in question a bonanza befell, and, as Jimmie told Mrs. Dale later on, "it was a walkover for him."

A small gray donkey, scarcely larger than a big Newfoundland dog, shuffled lazily past the tavern, heroically ignoring the brimming water-trough under its horse-rack.

He carried one of his long ears proudly erect; its fellow flapped dejectedly. His closely shaven tail maintained a rapid rotary activity, discouraging to venturesome flies. A brilliant scrap of

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

Brussels carpeting, bound about his shaggy little body with a knotted trunk-strap, served his rider for a saddle. In lieu of bridle a single rope-rein was twisted about his jaws. He bore himself with the air of a beast who knew his duplicate could not easily be found.

As much might be said for his rider. Tall, gaunt, and black, the old man sat his shuffling steed with the proud erectness of a soldier conscious of laurels well won and gracefully worn.

Slung across his back was a string of wild ducks that had yielded up their innocent lives to gratify man's palate. Upon the neck of his little beast he carefully poised a basket piled high with creamy fresh eggs. Behind him was a plethoric bag, ridgy with its bulging contents—sweet potatoes. On one arm a shining tin pail hung. A cup was chained to its spout. A gratuitous dispensation of buttermilk attended the donkey's jolting motion, and trickled down the old man's trousers. His head was covered with a vizorless cap made of coonskin, and his back was coatless.

Jimmie Dale pointed out this picturesque figure with an air of pride:

"Now, thar is a darkey wuth talkin' about. Him's the sort folks puts into story-books. He's wuth just about three dozen of the up-to-date

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

black scamps that presumes to look down on him, just because he sticks to the folks he used to belong to."

The lame man laid down a newspaper and followed the retreating donkey with his eyes:

"Who did he used to belong to?"

"The Leightons, of Frogneck. That's old Nathan; and if the truth was known, I reckon he knows just about as much about the Leighton affairs as Mr. Oscar himself does. But wild horses couldn't draw nothing out of old Nathan to the hurt of any one of them boys. I have heard it said that he took Dick's trouble mightily to heart. Dick was everybody's favorite."

"That Leighton is dead, I suppose," said the lame man languidly.

"You can't prove it by me," Jimmie answered briskly. The Leightons were a side issue. Nathan was an item not so easily disposed of.

"Een-a-most every Saturday the old codger jogs along past here, loaded to the muzzle with truck of one sort er another. Nobody knows how much money he'll carry back in exchange for that pack er sundries, nor what he does with it. Don't look like he spent it on dress-coats, does it? Nathan's as mysterious as the rest of the Frogneck folks. He's a reliable sort of ol' chappie. Sorter systematic, too. You can take

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

your oath on it, he'll jog straight 'long without tacking until he reaches Bill Lambdin's, and when he gets to Bill Lambdin's, corner of Fleet and Wood street, he'll sell out to the last drop of his buttermilk, pocket his gains, maybe buy a plug of tobacco, and jog back home. Nathan'll do to tie to. Ef you set here until three o'clock this afternoon, you'll see him go past agin, not a minute later nor a minute sooner. He's like a old clock, himself."

But apparently the lame man had no intention of sitting there until three o'clock in the afternoon. On the contrary, he finished his first pint of beer somewhat hurriedly, and reaching for his crutches, lifted himself by their aid into a standing posture.

"I guess I'll be going. Good-morning, Dale."

And he stumped slowly down the broken brick walk that intervened between the public sidewalk and the tavern door. Jimmie looked after him thoughtfully:

"I'll be dogged if there ain't something about him that brings old Jake Dingley to my mind every pop. It must be in his voice, for it surely ain't in his coat, nor in his company-manners, nor in that fine gold watch, nor in the a'r's he puts on when he pulls out that fat pocketbook."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Here Jimmie put back his head and laughed aloud. The idea of old Jake Dingley carrying any sort of pocketbook was inexpressibly funny.

On sober second thoughts Jimmie concluded that it was just a chance similarity of voices that brought the tipsy old tinker to his mind whenever the well-dressed Mr. Hinton was about.

And then, as the tall slender figure of the cripple, with his long well-brushed white beard, his neatly fitting brown-cloth coat and spotless linen, disappeared around a corner, Jimmie busied himself gathering up the scattered newspapers with which his visitor had strewn the tavern porch.

Since coming into that lucky thousand dollars through the chance reading of Leslie Cuthbert's advertisement for his cousin, Jimmie had been duly impressed with the importance of newspaper reading. He never slighted the "Wants" column of any printed sheet. "Who knows but what lightning might strike twicet in the same place, although folks said it never did?"

"Even Ponola gets up its wants ads.," he said, carefully pondering a solitary paragraph under that caption in the local paper.

"Wanted—To know if R. S. L. would like to receive authentic information concerning F. D. L. He can do so by calling on M. A. L."

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

Jimmie puckered his sandy brows in vain over these triple initials. In vain he went over and over Ponola's list of "L citizens." "Them letters just wouldn't fit nowhar nor nobody."

It would have interested him to know that the lame man had been puzzling over the same paragraph when he had drawn his attention to old Nathan Dwight. His success in elucidating it, if greater than Jimmie's, had only been partial. "If 'M. A. L.,' whom he couldn't in the least locate, was in position to give Richard Sander-son Leighton authentic information touching his wife, Florence Dingley Leighton, then some one was playing traitor."

With singular directness, considering what an absolute stranger to the town he must have been, Hinton found his way to the corner of Fleet and Wood streets, and to Bob Lambdin's store.

Under an umbrella-china that shaded the long horse-rack in front of "Lambdin's" the little gray donkey was hitched by its rope bridle. Near by, sitting on an inverted mackerel-kit, in a certain dignified aloofness from the laughing, chattering, chaffering Saturday throng, old Nathan counted his receipts into the crown of his hat, preparatory to transferring them to the worn leather wallet that lay open on his knees.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

In his self-absorption he had neither eyes nor ears for the crowd about him. It was only when a shadow fell immediately upon the little heaps of dimes and nickels in his hat that he looked up startled and affronted. The lame man towered above him, resting easily on his polished crutches.

"Am I too late to get a glass of buttermilk, old man?"

"Too late, sir. Sorry, sir. Nary drop lef'."

"I'm sorry, too, for they tell me yours is the best that comes to town."

"Thank you, sir. It ain't got no water in it."

And Nathan subsided into a silence which indicated his desire to be left alone. But the lame man was on another quest.

Suddenly there fluttered into Nathan's hat, completely eclipsing its dingy little hoard, a crisp new five-dollar bill.

"Add that to your pile, ol' man."

The old man looked up to meet the friendliest of smiles. He looked down at the wonderful bill wistfully.

"Thank you, sir, but I done clean sol' out. I got nothin' to give you for it."

"Oh, yes, you have, Nathan—something worth that bill many times over to me."

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

"Yes, sir? I ain't quite clear in my mind what it mout be."

"I will make it so. Come this way."

And without any more words the cripple led the way to the steps of a little wooden building a yard or two farther down the street. It was the Ponola schoolhouse, and, it being Saturday, they had the steps all to themselves.

The white man sat down. The black one stood before him, respectfully holding his hat in his two hands.

"Well, Nathan," said Hinton.

"Yes, sir," said Nathan curtly.

"I paid you that five dollars in advance for some information I want."

"As to what, sir?" The old man drew himself up rigidly. He was prepared to padlock his lips at a second's warning.

"I want to know how Mr. Dick Leighton can be found. Now don't start as if I'd touched you on a boil, Nathan. You know all about him. You know better than his brother does where he is. I am not going to ask you to give him away. I am not going to ask you to do anything but what he would thank you for doing. See, you needn't even tell me where he is; but you go home, you tell him that you can put your finger on a man who can tell him all about his

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

wife, from the day he lost sight of her up to now."

Nathan uttered an incredulous grunt:

"Thar ain't but one man top of the yerth that could do that, and he ain't likely to venture too near Mr. Dick."

"And that one man—?"

"Is old Jake Dingley, the triflinist specimen of po' wite trash 'twixt this and Georgy. He played that boy one mangy trick."

Behind his gold-bowed glasses the lame man's eyes danced oddly:

"All right, Nathan; just you tell Mr. Richard what you've heard, and see if he won't be glad to come to the Traveller's Rest on Monday evening, about half-past nine."

"That he won't never do. But I mout ask him—"

Nathan stopped abruptly. He was talking unguardedly. The lame man laughed.

"And you wouldn't have to go far to ask him."

"I can find him, sir, if need be."

"Well, then, if you want to do him a good turn, find him."

"Poor boy! Poor Marse Dick! I sholy don't want to do him no bad turn. He's had more'n his sheer of trouble already, and the

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

good Lord knows that befo' Nathan Dwight would be cotched adding one feather's weight to his load, he'd light his pipe with that crisp bill ef it were the last sight of money to be granted him 'tween here and the new Jerusalem."

"What can I say, Nathan, to prove that I am his friend?"

Nathan contracted his shaggy brows judicially.

"Talk is cheap, master, and I don't lay none too much stress on folks' words. I believe in acts."

"Well, then, what can I do, Nathan, to convince you that I am acting in good faith with Dick Leighton?"

"You can tell me, to start wid, who you is, and what concern you is got to meddle wid his private affairs."

Hinton laughed, then frowned. There were other interests than his own to be considered at this juncture. Amy and Cuthbert had shown a disposition to leave him out of their councils recently, but "he would act square."

"A manifest lack of confidence in me," he said to himself mournfully. It takes a man a long time to outlive himself. But he must not jeopardize the success of the expedition in its

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

entirety, by pulling at his own strings too exclusively.

His long silence aroused Nathan's suspicions. Respectfully, but firmly, he pressed the five-dollar bill back into Hinton's hand.

"I guess it belongs to you, boss. Leastways, when Nathan Dwight earns it he'll ask for it. If you think my Mr. Dick will be the better er the happier for a talk with you, I'll let him know, if I can get word to him 'twixt now and this Saturday coming, that a Mr. Hinton—I've heard folks entitle you that—which is stoppin' at the old Robertson house, is anxious to talk to him on a matter of business, and will make it worth his while to call at the Robertson house Saturday coming, 'tween eleven o'clock and midnight."

Hinton rose somewhat sullenly:

"Have it your own way, you obstinate old rogue." This was not just the arrangement he would have preferred, but the main thing was to get speech of Leighton.

Nathan stood still, hat in hand. Evidently he had something more to say. He said it with gentle slowness:

"And I think it right, nothin' more than right, boss, to say that if you knowed that boy as well as I do, you'd think twicet before fetch-

ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

ing him to town on a fool's errand. Trouble ain't a temper-sweetener."

"I know him, Nathan. At least I think I do, and this is no fool's errand."

"I'm glad, sir, for your sake, p'intedly for your sake."

And with a superb wave of his long arm Nathan turned and strode off in the direction of his donkey.

Hinton called after him: "So you won't take this bill?"

"Not till I is earned it, sir, fa'r and squar'."

From the steps of the schoolhouse Hinton went straightway to the only telegraph-office in town and dispatched a message:

"Can you possibly join me here by this coming Saturday? Have about run the game to earth. Think your presence might make matters easier for me. Answer."

The message was vaguely addressed to "Mrs. F. L. Eighton, Conservatory of Music, Chicago." It had no signature.

"Rush it through," said Hinton as he flung the price of the telegram on the counter.

In the course of two hours he had an answer to it in his hands:

"When you left me, you carried with you a clear understanding upon what terms we could

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

meet again. My terms remain unaltered. Have no desire whatever to make matters easier for you."

"Humph!" said Hinton, tearing the telegram into bits. "She's got the obstinacy of a mule in her, spite of her cooing ways and dove-like eyes."

XVI

AMY SPOILS MISS RITTENHOUSE'S DRIVE AND A JUNE AFTERNOON BY TELLING A GHASTLY STORY

MISS RITTENHOUSE was enjoying herself to the point of gayety. She and the gay side of life had long since parted company, but to-day her lovely eyes had lost some of their wistful sadness, a soft pink flush had spread itself all over the smooth oval of her cheeks, and the depressing downward curves in the corners of her mouth, those sure indices of a heart bowed down, had temporarily vanished.

Miss Hinton had carried her threat or promise—which shall we call it?—into execution, and Hammond, rigidly erect on the box-seat of the Cuthbert victoria, drove the Cuthbert span swiftly along the sweet-smelling country roads with a superb sense of superiority to his surroundings.

It would have been worth his while to drive those satin-coated beasts through Lincoln Park

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

or along Michigan Avenue, with such a pair of women behind them, for "neither horses nor women could be beat anywhere," but to waste them on Ponola—faugh !

But there was no sense of waste in the minds of the two beautiful women he was conveying. Amy was briskly alive to the underlying import of this afternoon drive; Olivia was cheerfully conscious of a temporary escape from the increasing gloom of Frogneck.

There was exhilaration in the crisp October day with its translucent atmosphere and its brilliant blue skies, softened by fleecy white clouds. There was exhilaration in the lilt of bird-notes among the fragrant sweet gum-trees and sun-warmed pines; there was exhilaration in the bare escape from Madam Leighton's darkened rooms and heavy flower-laden corridors.

Moreover, Amy was at her sparkling best. What a charming talker she was showing herself ! Miss Rittenhouse sighed as the girl prattled on touching the gay city life that had once been her own.

"And you are soon going back to it all," she said wistfully, laying one of her little gloved hands in Amy's. "I believe that I feel envious."

"Yes, soon. That is, as soon as Mr. Cuthbert

A GHASTLY STORY

can wind up the business that brought him South."

"I thought he was here on a land-inspection trip with a view to investment—so Teddy told us—and that you were here for your father's health."

"Partially. Only Mr. Hinton is not my father."

Amy leaned sideways from the carriage to note their whereabouts. She had calculated every rod of her progress. Hammond had driven her over the route only the day before. He knew exactly the spot, on the banks of the pebbly little creek, at which he was to halt his horses. Virtually, Hammond was a member of "the firm." Perceiving their near approach to the spreading sycamore-tree which dipped its long arms in the clear water of the creek, she turned towards Olivia with a strange, almost apologetic voice.

"Would you mind walking up to the top of that little mound? I am sure it must be lovely in that grove of magnolias, and perhaps we might find some of those lovely white magnolia-flowers that somebody says look like white doves with folded wings."

Hammond drew up under the sycamore-tree. The two women alighted. Miss Rittenhouse led

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

the way up the narrow footpath bordered by goldenrod and wild heliotrope. She laughed merrily.

"We will walk to the top of the mound by all means, dear, and you shall make a closer acquaintance with that beautiful magnolia-grove, that seems wasted on an old plantation burying-ground. But for those white-winged doves, as you call the blossoms, you will have to come back in spring."

"I shall never come back. I am afraid I will never, never see any of you again after I go away this time. And—and—you will all come to hate me."

"Hate you ! Why, Teddy, poor boy, is your most abject slave. He adores you."

"And I—and I—oh, well, I suppose it wouldn't do to say I adore him." Amy laughed nervously, and, forging to the front, recklessly parting the briars with her gloved hands, plunged through the sagging gate into the little neglected graveyard.

Miss Rittenhouse followed more slowly. She had a nice regard for her skirts, and the average woman's horror of creeping things.

"This was the Frogneck plantation cemetery during slave times," she said, picking her way daintily after Amy, "and I can't say that I find it very attractive for a stroll."

A GHASTLY STORY

"Oh, we won't stay here long. I have a fancy for penetrating as far as that blaze of crimson blossoms, and then we will turn back."

"That blaze of crimson blossoms is beautiful to look at, but deadly to embrace. It is the flower of the poison-oak."

They had reached the shining magnolia-tree, about whose glossy foliage the superb crimson trumpets had intertwined themselves in graceful intricacy.

Amy folded her hands and looked up at them: " ' Beautiful to look at, but deadly to embrace.' Of how many subtle women the same can be said ! Oh, see that convenient old log. Once it was a stately tree, and I am sure it fell there centuries ago on purpose to give me a resting-place to-day."

She flung the shawl she had carried over her arm all afternoon, across the mossy log, and invited Miss Rittenhouse to share her "divan" with her. Olivia demurred. She was "sure there must be snakes or toads or other monsters" hidden under the lichens that clung to the log.

"All the same, dear Princess Olivia, I want you to sit here by me. I want to talk with you. I want to tell you something, to ask your advice. I brought you away from the carriage on pur-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

pose. Hammond has such dreadfully sharp ears."

Olivia seated herself with a smile.

"Dear me! it must be about you and our dear boy Teddy. You are actually nervous."

All the merriment had died out of Amy's manner. Her face was pale and her voice constrained as she answered:

"No, it is about Mr. Oscar Leighton I want to talk to you."

An answering constraint crept into Olivia's manner.

"Ah! That is another thing. Of course you know I am only an employé at Frogneck? Mr. Oscar Leighton is a very reserved man. I know little or nothing about his affairs."

"I am sorry. And yet you like him well enough to ward trouble from him if you could, I suppose?"

She was leaning forward, industriously plucking up by the roots innumerable fragile weeds that crowded about her well-shod feet. She did not look at Olivia.

Miss Rittenhouse answered gravely:

"I like him well enough to ward off trouble from him at any sacrifice, if I only knew how. I suppose you allude to that mortgage matter?"

A GHASTLY STORY

He starts for Chicago to-morrow to attend to that."

"To-morrow?" Amy sat up in unfeigned surprise. This was precipitating the dénouement by several days. There was no time for her to mince matters. "I don't think he will be allowed to go, Miss Rittenhouse."

"Allowed! Who could prevent it?"

"Mr. Leslie Cuthbert can—and in all probability will. Now I am going to tell you why. And when I get through, I am going to drive you back to Frogneck, and leave you entirely at liberty to make such use as you choose of the story I am going to tell you. As I told you once before, you will all hate me, but—that can't be helped. I deserve that you should."

"Your story, please," said Olivia coldly; "your preamble leaves me utterly perplexed."

"Doubtless. After all, there is no use in the world trying to soften some things, and this is one of them. I will have to talk a little about myself first."

She straightened herself upon the shawl, and nervously prodded the soft earth in front of her with the ferule of her parasol.

"I am dreadfully poor, Miss Rittenhouse; my poverty is only exceeded by my ambition. I have denied myself almost the necessities of life,

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

so as to hoard enough to take me to a Parisian art-school next year. About six months ago I struck upon a novel way of making money. I accidentally fell in with an immensely wealthy woman who had been robbed of some valuable jewelry under very peculiar circumstances. Suspicion pointed at a niece of hers, and she was afraid to follow up the clue for fear of a public scandal. I agreed to work the case up for her without any scandal. To shorten my story, I recovered her jewels and made my own reputation as a detective.

"My next client was a cousin of my own, a lovely woman, who has been most unjustly dealt by. But hers is another story. Mr. Leslie Cuthbert and this cousin of mine are good friends. When she informed him that I was going South for her, he engaged me at a handsome price to assist him in some inquiries he wanted to make."

Here Miss Rittenhouse made a movement of exhausted patience. It was not lost on Amy.

"I know you think I am a long time getting to anything connecting Mr. Oscar Leighton with this business, but I always like to clear up the ground well as I go along."

"Yes, of course," said Olivia with vague politeness.

A GHASTLY STORY

"Mr. Cuthbert is a man of means and stands very high in business circles in Chicago. His reputation is unblemished. By rights he is the heir at law to an immensely wealthy old bachelor uncle, whose interest in him was purposely and viciously estranged by a scamp of a cousin of his. This cousin, they say, was one of that magnetic sort of fellows who can wind men and women around their fingers like so much twine.

"He managed this old bachelor uncle so successfully that Leslie Cuthbert was left out of his will, and the bad cousin put down for all the old man's money. They say he was a handsome rogue, and very successful with women, although no one seems to know whether he ever married or not.

"About seven months ago his business as a real-estate broker brought him South. His confidential clerk knew of several points at which he expected to touch, among them Ponola. When nothing was heard from him in the course of six weeks, his people began to think it strange. As time went on, until two months had elapsed and still no tidings, that terrible old uncle accused Leslie Cuthbert of having made away with his cousin.

"Of course this stirred Cuthbert up to a white heat, and he immediately began to advertise lib-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

erally and extensively, offering rewards for any information concerning his cousin. The reward was claimed and earned by the landlord of a tavern in Ponola, who wrote Cuthbert about his cousin, telling him that he had stopped at his tavern for a few hours and then gone on to Frogneck."

Up to this point in her narrative Amy had been conscious of a perfectly polite but rather bored auditor. She never once looked at Miss Rittenhouse, but she felt the convulsive shock that shook her slight frame when Dale's letter came into the story.

"It was just about that time that my cousin and Mr. Cuthbert happened to be discussing their troubles, and when he heard that I was coming South with my cousin's father—not my own—on her business, he proposed that we should work together.

"It is astonishing how rapidly a mystery will unravel itself as soon as you once get hold of the most delicate clue. Positively, this one is unravelling itself; but the strangest feature of it all is, that the nearer we reach our goal the more despondent Cuthbert and I become. It seems so perfectly hideous to associate the crime of murder with such people as the Leightons—"

Olivia put up a hand and twisted her neck-

A GHASTLY STORY

scarf as if she were choking. Amy looked away from her persistently. Presently in a low suffocated voice she caught the words:

"And—who—dares—say—a murder has been committed? Of all men—by Oscar Leighton!"

"Of all men, by Oscar Leighton! I wish there was room for doubt. But Cuthbert has followed up clue after clue, until he has located the body of his murdered cousin—"

"Located the body of Frederic Bartlett!"

"I mentioned no names," said Amy, turning upon the unhappy woman a face so full of austere indignation that it was almost unrecognizable.

Olivia recovered herself by a superhuman exercise of will-power.

"No, I know you mentioned no names, but about the time you speak of, a stranger came to Frogneck. He stayed one night—I read his name in his hat. He went away the next morning, and was never heard of again."

"That is your mistake. Within a stone's throw of us—I can point to it with my parasol—he lies buried. When Oscar Leighton is brought to trial, the man who saw him bury Frederic Bartlett will be forthcoming. Bah! What a ghastly story to spoil our lovely drive

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

with. But, as you are only an employé at Frogneck, it cannot touch you very nearly. Let us get back to the carriage."

She sprang up from the log with nervous energy, and opened her parasol. Olivia made a motion to do the same, gasped, and fell forward in an unconscious heap.

Amy ran forward alone until her voice could reach Hammond.

"Hammond, you must carry Miss Rittenhouse back to the carriage. She has been taken suddenly ill."

Hammond came quickly at her call, and lifting the still unconscious woman in his arms, bore her to the carriage. Amy followed, remorseful but triumphant.

"I knew it, poor Princess Olivia, I knew it. Now, if Teddy's brother is arrested for the murder of Frederic Bartlett, I'll turn chorewoman or offer my head for sale at a greengrocer's."

When Olivia regained consciousness, she was reclining with her head on Amy's shoulder, and the Cuthbert horses were bearing her fleetly back to Frogneck. She shuddered and drew herself away from the arm encircling her. Pushing the damp hair back from her forehead with a despairing gesture, she muttered as if to herself:

A GHASTLY STORY

"There is some mistake in all this."

"From my heart I hope so," said Amy.

Not another word passed between them until the carriage passed through the gate that led into the Frogneck grounds. Then Olivia turned a pitifully white face upon her companion:

"Of course, Miss Hinton, you understand that—I shall make use of what I have heard."

"Any use but such as might defraud justice of its ends. Of course we have provided against that contingency."

Leaning towards her guest impulsively, Amy brought her lips into close contact with Miss Rittenhouse's ear.

"I am so sorry I had to do this thing—for your sake."

"Mine? You are mysterious to-day."

For answer Amy drew a watch from her belt, as if time had become a matter of infinite moment. Olivia watched her dully. What difference did it make how much of this sweet June day had been consumed by that ghastly story?

Suddenly her eyes grew wide with terror and she clasped Amy's arm convulsively. Her own pictured face had been revealed by the opening of the watch.

"How came that there?" she asked in a

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

stified whisper. "What are you doing with that watch?"

"Your first question I cannot answer—if you allude to this picture. As for the watch, Mr. Cuthbert loaned it to me, my own being out of repair."

The carriage drew up under the portecochère. Hammond appeared at the carriage door almost simultaneously. Olivia made an impulsive forward movement. Amy laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"One moment, please. Do not take any rash step: it would be worse than useless."

Olivia looked at her with a wintry smile. She had quite regained control of herself.

"I suppose I ought to thank you for my very pleasant drive. It has been marred by your unpleasant story, but you have not been in the detective business long enough yet to realize how obtuse the brightest minds can show themselves in face of the shallowest mysteries."

"She is playing her last trump card," said Amy as she gave Hammond his orders to drive home.

XVII

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK WITH THE PURPOSE OF TELLING CUTHBERT A TRUE STORY

ONE by one the lights went out in the Frogneck mansion that night, at hours late enough to suggest considerable mental activity among the four adults constituting its very quiet family circle.

The fact that the next day would be "mail day," a tri-weekly affair at Frogneck, gave coloring to the early separation of the two men.

They had dined alone. Madam Leighton only occasionally took her place at table; oftener now than heretofore, as "perhaps Miss Rittenhouse would feel the better for seeing some womankind at table. She must miss Rebecca."

On this particular occasion, however, Suzanne had brought Miss Rittenhouse's request to be excused from dinner on the score of a violent headache.

Teddy's face fell at this announcement. He

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

had seen the Cuthbert carriage drive away with Miss Rittenhouse and Miss Hinton in the early afternoon, and had looked forward with all a lover's eagerness to hearing the beloved one discussed socially.

But as a woman's headache is one of those things there is no getting around, he ate his dinner in disappointed silence, and soon afterwards, muttering something about letters to write, left Oscar alone for the evening.

Oscar, too, had letters to write. All of his plans were made for leaving home to-morrow, and things must be left in such shape that, should he never come back, Ted would be able to take the helm without too great a strain upon his untried hands.

Teddy wanted to write a letter to Amy Hinton. For months now he had been meeting her on every possible occasion. The Graysons, "blessings on their frosty pows," had nourished his love-affair with the most delightful amiability. They had decided between themselves that "this rich Chicago girl would be a good catch for Ted, who had only a share in a debt-ridden plantation."

So the course of Ted's first love-affair had been made as smooth for him as a couple of warm-hearted old intermeddlers could make it,

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK

and Amy had seemed to smile on him; so "why not tell her plump up and down" that he was her devoted lover, and that unless she would favor his suit life henceforth would be nothing to him but a "hideous blank" ?

"It was going to be a confoundedly hard thing to do on paper. He didn't have Oscar's turn for writing, but whenever he had tried to say anything of that sort to her face he had found her as elusive as one of those little white butterflies that look like floating flower-petals."

So, while Ted racked his poor young head for sentences profoundly eloquent and absolutely new wherein to tell the old, old story, Oscar rapidly and sternly covered sheet after sheet of paper destined for his brother Richard's eyes.

"Nathan is to hand you this," he wrote in conclusion, "at the first opportunity. It is late in the day for me to enter my protest against the cruel outrage put upon the innocent members of this family, in my vain efforts to make good a rash promise made by our mother.

"You and she, Richard, have ruined us. For myself, I make no complaint. Becky and Edward have been the chief sufferers. I am going to make one desperate and final effort to rescue

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

our home. You should know that the mortgage on it has passed into the hands of your wife. This is the first knowledge I have had of her whereabouts, and I transmit it to you, as complete as it has come to me, and as promptly as possible. I promised you that much.

"I am going to see her. I shall write you the result of my interview. She has every reason to hate the name of Leighton. I shall discover for myself how she stands affected towards you. Up to the present time our mother has been allowed full sway in this matter, and her indomitable pride has blinded her to every dictate of justice or humanity.

"I notice that your wife's maiden name appears as the mortgagee. This may mean repudiation of you on the score of desertion. Of this later on. I should like you to keep Nathan informed of your whereabouts, so that I can communicate with you without any unnecessary hindrances.

"Frankly, Richard, I am utterly weary of wasting my life, trying to adjust matters to the snarl you and our mother have gotten them into. I insist upon it that you come back like a man, give over your sentimental roving, and shoulder your share of the responsibility that is breaking me down.

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK

"Your little Mellicent is well, and deserving of a better fate than to be thrown on the tender mercies of a heartless grandmother and a careworn uncle. Understand, however, that I thoroughly indorse the action of her mother in sending her here to 'take her rightful place as a Leighton, in the home of her father.' It was a proud declaration of rights on the part of the tinker's daughter, and I respect her for it."

At that identical moment Madam Dangerfield Leighton was writing to the "tinker's daughter." How to make her letter conciliatory without being apologetic was a problem that taxed her to a severe degree. Her waste-basket bore witness to the number of her unsuccessful efforts in that line.

"If she could only see the girl face to face, it would be much easier."

Perhaps Madam Leighton was conscious of her superior personal weight. A mere pen-and-ink presentation of matters could never be as impressive "with that sort of people" as the pomp and circumstance of one's actual presence.

She leaned back in her chair and sighed. Memory slipped into its magic-lantern a slide bearing a picture which at the time had ministered materially to her selfish and inordinate pride. It showed her:

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

A lady, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of a woman of wealth and fashion, bearing down imposingly upon a poor little hovel where a miserable tipsy tinker sat over his soldering-pot, pipe in mouth; showed her the lady striking a bargain with the tinker to disappear with his daughter, whose mischievous beauty had proven potent to overturn the plans of two aristocratic households; showed her the lady stopping to dictate a lie to the tipsy tinker: he was to make his daughter believe that her high-born lover had deceived and then deserted her of his own accord.

The tipsy tinker would have done much, aside from the tinkering of old pots, for a ten-dollar bill at that particular juncture; how much for a hundred-dollar bill, with munificent promises for the future ?

The lady had had it all her own way, and had stepped back into her carriage with a triumphant sense of having managed things beautifully, slightly marred at the last moment by the glimpse of a flower-like face set in a tangle of yellow hair, as ill luck brought her face to face with the tinker's daughter when her horses turned a corner.

That was Madam Leighton's only glimpse of her daughter-in-law. Strange how ineffaceable

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK

that startled look from a pair of blue eyes had proven to be !

And now she was trying to nullify that day's work.

Would she ever be able to do it ? And how should she go about it ? The haughty old woman bowed her head until it rested with all its weight of anxious thoughts upon the sheet of paper upon which she had written:

" I feel that the time has come when I must humble myself in order to right a great wrong. If—let me erase that 'if.' I did you a great wrong. I led you to believe that Richard was untrue to you. He has loved you always—better, far better than the mother who bore him. For your sake he has forsaken me. You are avenged. I do not ask you to forgive me. I simply say believe me.

" Richard has sworn that he will never sleep under this roof until you are found. He will keep his oath. God alone knows the passion of longing that fills my desolate mother-heart. I loved him above all created things. For his sake I sinned. I stooped to a lie. For his sake I have impoverished his brothers and sister. He is yours, all yours, and when you hold him in your arms again, think forgivingly of the woman who gave him birth.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"It is not generous, but your father is more culpable than I, for he took the price of your happiness in his greedy clutch when he knew, what I did not, that the marriage ceremony had actually been performed between you and my son.

"My son Oscar goes to Chicago in person to-morrow. You will see him. He goes to try to secure the roof over our heads. He is Richard's brother, and in no way a party to my cruelty."

So far she had written rapidly, under the influence of an intense excitement. She stopped and read it all over; then she tore the closely written sheets into a thousand bits. Her face writhed with pain.

"Abject ! abject ! I cannot do it. I will not. Let her turn me out into the fields to die, first."

And in the silent seclusion of her curtained alcoves she yielded herself up to a passion of unavailing tears. When she grew calmer she pushed her chair away from her desk and made herself ready for bed.

"Oscar must arrange matters as best he can," she said, turning out her lamps and lying down to a sleepless night.

Miss Rittenhouse, too, was writing a letter that night. There was no indirection about it, no indecision. She filled sheet after sheet and

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK

flung them aside without other care than to number them in proper succession.

The clock was striking midnight when she drew a fresh sheet from her portfolio and wrote on it:

“ And now that I have forewarned you of your danger and shown you how to escape from it, I feel at liberty to express the curiosity that besets me on one score.

“ I cannot understand how you, a man with a clear head and a conscience peculiarly alive to all that trenches upon the honor of a gentleman, could have brought yourself to thus quietly, even secretly, dispose of the body of this unfortunate stranger within your gates.

“ It may be that the isolation of your life on this lonely plantation has tended to make you autocratic. You have been a law unto yourself so long that perhaps you lost sight of the bearings this recent discovery would have upon you. If you had only recognized the powers that be, at the proper time and place, so much misery might have been spared you and this most unhappy of women—Olivia Rittenhouse.”

When she had finished her letter she addressed it to Oscar Leighton, and leaving her desk, she moved rapidly about her room, putting a few articles in a small handbag and

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

dressing herself completely in an outdoor costume.

The "grandfather clock" in the hall downstairs was striking the half-hour past midnight when she extinguished the lights in her room and stole softly out into the darkened corridor.

There was not a light burning in the house. With the confidingness of all rural dwellers, darkness reigned supreme. With noiseless swiftness she passed down the broad central stairway, and stopped in front of Leighton's partially closed study door.

It was just possible that Leighton might be lingering there yet. She often heard him pass her door, on his way to his own bedroom in the turret, as late as one and two o'clock. By the ghostly glimmer of the dying wood-fire she saw his empty desk-chair and deserted fireside lounge.

There was no one in the room. She pushed the door wide open, and gliding across its threshold, she moved rapidly towards the large desk in the centre of the room. There she paused and carefully propped the letter she had written against a large cut-glass inkstand on the desk. This done she stood for a moment with folded hands and down-dropped head. Then the pro-

OLIVIA LEAVES FROGNECK

found silence of the room was broken by great sobs, and the fragile form of the lonely woman shook with the violence of her emotions.

"He was good to me, he honored me—and now—"

With a gesture of despair she turned and left the room, without once looking back.

Softly drawing back the heavy iron bolt with which the great front door was secured at night, she let herself out of the house. The fresh night air struck a chill through her veins. She drew her cape closer up about her throat. She carried her bag on her arm, and walked with the rapid directness of a person who had a definite goal in view.

The fragrance of the chrysanthemums which she and Becky had planted, and tended so lovingly, was afloat upon the heavy night air. Becky was gone, and she was going. The chrysanthemums would bloom for some one else ! Was not it always thus—one to sow, another to reap ?

The paths, with their carpets of fallen pine-needles, grew slippery under her feet. Only the day before she had finished a cunningly embroidered silken bag, that she and Melly were going to fill with the balsamic needles for a pine pillow to woo coy slumber. Alas ! all the

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

balsam needles in the wide, wide world could never again give her a restful night.

How far away and futile all those innocent little plans of yesterday seemed to her, as she forged resolutely through the darkness, under the starlit skies, past the towering oaks, through the tall white gate-posts along the road she had travelled that very afternoon behind the Cuthbert horses !

And now, alone, afoot, aweary of life with all its emptiness, its fair-false promises, its biting ironies, she went her way with but one defined idea in her tired brain:

To see Leslie Cuthbert, tell him all that she knew about Frederic Bartlett's coming and going—and then ?

What matter ? Who cared ?

XVIII

LESLIE CUTHBERT HEARS THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS COUSIN'S DEATH

"If we had not encumbered ourselves with a side issue," Cuthbert said petulantly.

"Pardon me, but, to be just, we have not wasted much time or energy in that direction," Miss Hinton had interrupted tartly.

And then Hammond dared not listen any longer, for he held in his hand a note that had just been left by the hostler of the Traveller's Rest, with instructions to deliver it at once.

He delivered it to Cuthbert, to whom it was addressed, and then discreetly discovered that the curtains needed readjustment. Hammond labored under the indignant conviction that the plot was thickening and he was not being kept duly advised of its progress.

"She is at the tavern and wants to see me immediately," Cuthbert said, rising from the breakfast-table over which he and Amy had lingered, purposely outsitting the lame man.

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"At Dale's so early? Then she must have come in last night. Of course I knew she would come," said Amy somewhat triumphantly.

"Why?" Cuthbert asked, standing in the doorway to draw on his gloves.

"Because, if she were sure of electrocution or imprisonment for life, she would not let him suffer. There is some puzzle about this business yet—something which completely baffles my poor wits."

"Perhaps it will be clearer when I come back. What have you on hand for this morning?"

"Nothing but a letter to the side issue. Poor Flossie!"

Mrs. Dale received "the gentleman for Miss Rittenhouse." Her sandy eyebrows were arched with surprise. Her thin lips severely compressed themselves after the admission:

"Yes, sir. Mr. Oscar Leighton's governess is up-stairs. She got in here just about daybreak, more dead'n alive. Our boy Dallas drives a milk-cart, and he found her trudging to'des town, lookin' like she was clean tuckered out, and he just 'sisted on giving her a lift. It's my private opinion thar's been a wholesale row out to Frogneck, and she just picked up and left. Ef I—"

"I should like to see the lady, Mrs. Dale; I

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

have been sent for," said Cuthbert with exhausted politeness.

"Are you a doctor?"

"No, madam."

"Are you any kin of hers?"

"None at all. But I am a man who has an important piece of business to transact with this lady, so please show me to her room without any longer delay."

"Second floor, fust room to the right." The landlord's wife gave the information curtly, mentally registering the hope that the good name of the house wouldn't suffer by "such goings on."

Incidentally Cuthbert had received from Amy a somewhat gushing description of Olivia Rittenhouse's beauty.

"She would create a stunning social sensation in Chicago if she could divest herself of that dreadfully sad expression and be dressed by Markham. She may have done something terrible in her life, Mr. Cuthbert, but, my word for it, if the truth ever comes out, you will find that she has been more sinned against than sinning."

And Cuthbert had replied with a laugh:

"As we approach the *finale* of this detective job it begins to look as if we should decide that Fred's evanishment was nobody's crime."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"That is the *finale* I am hoping for and confidently am anticipating," said the little detective gravely.

Amy's summary came back to Cuthbert's mind at the moment he bowed over Olivia's extended hand. "She would make a stunning social sensation" anywhere.

Miss Rittenhouse made room for him upon the sofa he had found her reclining on, and went directly to the point.

"You are Mr. Leslie Cuthbert?" she asked in a voice that trembled with nervousness, but was nevertheless sweet and cultured.

"I am."

"And you were Frederic Bartlett's cousin?"

"I was."

"*I was his wife.*"

In spite of his superb equipoise, Cuthbert started violently.

"Pardon me, but I was not prepared for any such announcement."

"No, I suppose not; nor are you, I fancy, prepared for the still more startling announcement that I, and I alone, am responsible for his death."

Cuthbert turned his full gaze upon her with sad severity. His intimates had often rallied him on his quixotic attitude towards women.

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

They were to him something too good—when they were good pure women—for daily contact with the arena of the world where men wrestled with each other for the mastery with only half-subdued savagery.

With all his tender reverence for refined women surging in his heart at sight of this exquisitely delicate beauty, he felt a severe physical shock at the atrocious calmness with which she approached the subject that had brought them together.

“I see that I have shocked you terribly,” she said with a pathetic dropping of her head, “but I want to get over as quickly as possible what I came here to tell you. And then—and then—” She put one hand up to her head. “I hope I shall not break down before you understand everything clearly. If I should become ill, I should like to see Miss Hinton and Miss Leighton once—just once.”

“I will see that your wishes are carried out,” said Cuthbert coldly. “Kindly come to the revelation you have promised me.”

“I beg your pardon for trying your patience, but I feel so strangely, and I fear this story will rob me of what little strength I have left.”

She was so ghastly pale, and there were such

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

pathetic dark rings about her lovely eyes, that Cuthbert felt a wave of pity sweeping away all his horror of her as a "wicked woman."

"Let me order you some wine," he said in a kinder voice.

"No, you can do nothing for me but listen to me patiently, and I promise to be as brief as possible."

"Pray do not lose sight of your physical limitations."

She laughed bitterly and plunged into her story with nervous energy:

"Yes. I was Frederic Bartlett's wife for a whole day—that is, from ten o'clock in the morning, at which hour we were married in the parlor of our boarding-house, until ten o'clock that same night, when he mysteriously disappeared from my side in the Pullman car which was conveying us on the first stage of our honeymoon trip from Chicago to New York via Niagara Falls. I was Mrs. Frederic S. Bartlett just that long, and I fancied that I had done a good thing in exchanging my lonely maidenhood for a wifehood so full of promise.

"Your cousin and I came together by the mere chance of happening to select the same boarding-house. It was a fashionable and a select one, as boarding-houses go. The fact of

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

being admitted to it was a guarantee of respectability.

"I have been utterly alone in the world since my mother died, leaving me in very good circumstances. I have often thought, since my trouble came upon me, that it would have been better for me had I been left entirely to my own resources.

"As it was, bored, idle, and bearing the reputation of being a much wealthier woman than I was, admirers were not lacking. Among them all, Frederic Bartlett seemed to me best worth listening to. If he was your cousin, you knew him. You knew his fascinating manners, his gay laugh, his winning smile, his striking beauty."

"I knew him for what he was," said Cuthbert between set teeth: "an infernal fraud."

"I loved him for what I thought he was," said Olivia, "and—ah, well, we did not come together to discuss the shortcomings of the living man. There was no one to utter a warning note. On the contrary, such friends as I had congratulated me on winning such a prize: 'a wide-awake business man, a splendid all-around fellow, the heir to an immense property'—that was the way people spoke of him."

"I know, I know."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"As I told you, we were married, altogether privately, in the parlor of our boarding-house. It was my wish that there should be no invited guests. I was in mourning for my mother. We left immediately. We were to spend some time in New York City, afterwards—well, never mind the afterwards. Niagara Falls was to be our first stopping-place.

"We were sitting in our sleeper that evening talking, when two men entered the car in civilian clothes with a suddenness which meant nothing to me at the moment, but rather an inelegant termination to our conversation. Mr. Bartlett sprang up and, muttering something about looking for the smoker, left me.

"I was tired and settled myself for a doze, reclining against the pillows the porter had placed for me. The only empty compartment was immediately behind my own. The two men took possession of it, sitting with their backs against the cushions my head was resting on. They failed to make due allowance for the sharpness of my hearing, or trusted too infallibly to the noise of the train. Their low-toned conversation came to my ears distinctly. One of the men was evidently greatly chagrined:

" 'Either he never was on this train, or else he was the chap who went out by one door as

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

we came in at the other. We lost time scrutinizing the passengers as we came through. His back was just about broad enough for Bartlett's.'

"His companion suggested the propriety of getting a look at the hand-baggage in my compartment. It was then that I discovered that Mr. Bartlett had contrived to seize his own valise in departing. My smaller travelling-bag had my maiden name on it. 'Rittenhouse,' I heard one of the men say.

"This left so little room for doubt that my husband was wanted for something, that I innocently precipitated my own share in the catastrophe. I lifted myself into a sitting posture and touched the nearest shoulder to me. The man turned, showing me a pleasant kindly face.

"'If you gentlemen want to see my husband, Mr. Bartlett,' I said, 'I think you will find him in the smoker.' They looked at each other strangely, as I then thought, and one of them, springing to his feet and muttering, 'I'll leave this job to you, Wilson,' went out in the direction Mr. Bartlett had taken.

"The other one deliberately came around and seated himself in front of me. 'My friend there,' he said, 'wants me to explain matters to you. You've got nerve enough, I'm sure, not

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

to let any of the folks in the car see that you are disturbed. He won't find Bartlett on this train. He won't find him soon anyway, I predict. He's a slick one, beg your pardon. I guess he has fooled you, like he fooled that man's sister, and I take it I'm doing you a kindness in unmasking him. He's safe enough personally, for I take it that he left the train at the very station we took it. The man that's just left me has paid me to run Bartlett to earth. But it's like trying to tree an eel. If he and you are actually married, bigamy'll have to be added to the indictments against him. He's bought his way out of a heap of trouble before this, and it's likely he'll do so again; but I never could see a woman going it blind about one of these so-called magnetic fellows without letting go. I've let go again, and maybe you'll cuss me for it, but every word I've said is gospel truth.' Then he left me abruptly.

"It was a pleasant tale to hear on one's honeymoon. I sat quite still. No, I rang for the porter calmly, and ordered my berth made up. I was left without a ticket, but my private funds were ample. I did not go to Niagara Falls, as you may well imagine. I kept straight on to New York City, and buried myself in its immensity.

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

"I formed the habit of poring over the newspapers to see if I could discover the fate of the man whose wife I had been for a whole day. That was the way I chanced to see Mr. Leighton's advertisement for a governess and companion. I hated New York City; I was desolately alone there. I gladly came South. I lived happily at Frogneck until—until—one stormy night a stranger rode up to its door. He came on business with Mr. Leighton.

"On my way through the hall with his sister, I noticed that the stranger had carelessly flung his wet hat down on its crown. I lifted it to put it on a peg—and—was chilled to the soul by finding his name on it.

"I had done no wrong—I was no culprit; but the idea of facing him filled me with terror. I resolved to absent myself from the breakfast-table. He would go away, of course, after his night's entertainment and his morning refreshment. The next morning I wandered far afield, and only turned my face towards the house when I felt sure every one would have finished breakfast and be gone. As his destiny decreed, he, too, had left the house for a walk before breakfast. We met, to my consternation and his laughing amazement, on a little bridge that spans the creek at Frogneck. The storm of the pre-

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

vious night had swollen its waters to a rushing torrent. The weeping willows that spread their arms all about the narrow little bridge hid his advancing form until retreat was cut off for me.

"It matters not what he said or what I said in the moment of recognition. I charged him with his iniquities, as revealed to me by the man who had been employed to run him to earth. He laughed, and said all that had been made right and smooth. He called me his wife, and tried to embrace me. I thrust him from me with more strength than I thought these feeble arms possessed.

"He reeled backward. His feet must have caught in some projection of the bridge. As he fell he struck the rotten hand-rail, and it gave way. As he disappeared in the racing waters my heart leaped with a guilty joy. At that moment I was his murderer. The strong current carried him beneath and beyond the bridge. I looked only once. I saw him staggering to his feet on a boulder in the stream; then I fled.

"Believe me, please, until Miss Hinton told me the strange sequel of that grave under the magnolia-trees, I supposed that he had escaped but, too humiliated and angry to return to the house, had made his way to some other stopping-place.

CUTHBERT'S COUSIN'S DEATH

"His name was never mentioned. I never tried to trace him. I was only too glad to lose sight of him again.

"Of Mr. Leighton's incomprehensible conduct in disposing of your unfortunate cousin's remains in a secretive manner, thereby inviting suspicion, I will not speak, for I cannot understand it; but"—and here she rose trembling with excitement—"he is no more responsible for Frederic Bartlett's death than you are. Do you understand that clearly, Mr. Cuthbert?"

Her voice had risen shrilly. Her eyes glowed feverishly.

"Perfectly," he answered soothingly.

"And you believe me?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you, and—oh, yes, thank God! Now may I see Becky? Quickly, please, before it all gets mixed up in my poor tired head. I know now why she left her home, why she turned against him. Oh, I have so much to make right yet, and—I—am—so tired."

A great sob rent her tired bosom. She sighed, closed her eyes, and lay quite still in a merciful oblivion of all things.

XIX

THE TIPSY TINKER AND DICK LEIGHTON HOLD A PERSONAL INTERVIEW IN OLD NATHAN'S CABIN

THE little room in old Nathan's cabin which he called " Mr. Dick's " was at its best, with the parlor lamp alight on the small table placed precisely in the middle of the gay home-made rag rug, and a big bunch of dahlias in a tumbler on the mantelpiece.

Nathan had every reason to believe that the " vagabond-gentleman " was near by, as the great Gordon setter, who was his inseparable companion had made a short tentative excursion as far as the cabin door that morning, trotted placidly through the familiar premises, and gone his way.

Nathan was especially anxious that things should be " prime " on this visit, for he had that letter of Oscar's to deliver, and also the message of the " tall gent on crutches."

His chief concern was that the supper, which

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

he had provided out of his own purse and prepared with the skill of an ex-chef, should not suffer by waiting. His anxiety on this score kept him vibrating between the "best room" and the kitchen with the regularity of a tireless pendulum.

From one of these excursions he returned to find Mammy Rose planted squarely on the bright red hearth. She lifted her turbaned head until the pinnacle of its gay plaids reached the level of the dahlias on the mantelpiece:

"I suppose you thinks things looks monstrous fine yere, bro' Nathan," she said loftily.

"Toluble, sister Rose, only toluble," Nathan answered modestly.

"Well, I'm glad to find you ain't in no ways out settin', fur I've come over to put a finger into this pie myself—into this muss ruther, I should say."

"Which muss?"

Nathan glanced apprehensively about the orderly little room.

"Oh, the room's all right, Nathan, and you is all right 's fur as you go. But this thing of a Leighton slinking 'round his own home uv nights, like a po' vagabone tramp, is got to be put a stop to. And I'm the woman to do it. I didn't nurse every one of them boys from the

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

time they was put into kilts, to be set aside in my old age. Mammy's word used to count for somethin', an' it's got to be heard in the land once mo'."

She paused to give Nathan an opportunity for comment, then resumed combatively:

"I jedge from the way you're fixin' up that you're lookin' for him, and here I stays tell he comes. I've got one or two items of information fur 'im. Fust and fo'most, I want to tell him that he is killin' of his own mother as straightforderd as if he stuck a knife inter her heart."

"You want to tell him what?"

A rich and cultured voice projected itself into the conversation, and Mammy Rose found herself, after the lapse of years, face to face with her one-time nursling. "How are you, old lady?" and the wanderer laid his hands affectionately on the old woman's broad shoulders.

She looked the handsome stalwart figure calmly over, from its crown of curly brown hair down to the heavy mud-bespattered boots drawn over his trousers.

At one time life held few things more awe-inspiring to the Leighton boys than Mammy's frown and Mammy's turban. She essayed the task of reasserting their awesomeness on this

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

occasion. Her keen old eye flashed disdainfully:

"Here you stands, fair and fine to look at, I grant you. You've grown as straight as any pine in the woods. Seems like you was waxing younger and stronger, whilst leaving your brother Oscar to bear the brunt of your wrongdoing. What manner of man do you call him, Richard, son, that will shirk his share of the heat and burden of the day onto shoulders so much more patient and more deserving? What for should all the troubles that come on the Leightons be piled onto that boy Oscar's shoulders, and the rest of you go scot-free? Oh, you needn't to bring them black brows together in such a ugly frown. You can't scare old Rose. I've been tryin' to get sight of you for many a long day."

"And so have I."

This second interruption came from the lame man, who lifted himself over the high door-sill somewhat laboriously, and advanced with a benevolent smile which he bestowed impartially on the three surprised faces turned towards him.

"Mr. Richard Leighton, I believe?" He advanced far enough to extend his hand cordially. "I was afraid our friend Nathan, there, might

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

fail to secure me an interview. I have been presumptuous enough to be my own outlook—”

“ You have chosen your words well, sir; presumptuous it seems to me, as I have certainly given no one reason to believe I was anxious for visitors. Nathan, a chair. In view of your infirmity, sir, be seated.”

Mammy Rose looked on at this little scene with mingled pride and apprehension. Her “ boy was sholy holding his own.” But how did she know what that fine-dressed old man might stand for ? He might be anything from a bishop down to a deputy sheriff. At any rate, her opportunity for getting a finger into the pie was lost for the time being, so she withdrew towards Nathan’s kitchen with dignified gravity.

With the air of a man conscious of holding a winning card, Hinton accepted the proffered chair and dropped into it with a sigh of genuine fatigue, saying with abrupt directness:

“ I come as an ambassador from Mrs. Richard Leighton, and of course should prefer a strictly private interview.”

Nathan promptly followed Mammy Rose into retreat. Richard bestowed a stare of insolent incredulity on his visitor and then flung himself into the nearest chair.

“ To say that you ‘ come as an ambassador,’ ”

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

he said haughtily, "is to intimate that a third party is needed to negotiate matters between Mrs. Leighton and myself. I deny any such necessity. Through the perfidy of others we have temporarily been deprived of each other's addresses. If you are prepared to give me my wife's address you will have rendered me the only service in your power."

The lame man laughed softly and adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses carefully, as if he wanted not to fail of an accurate impression of this masterful young man's appearance. "Small blame Florrie had made a fool of herself about him."

Richard found this scrutiny peculiarly irritating.

"Primarily," he said with heightened color, "who are you? You can scarcely expect me to take your unsupported word that you come as a messenger from my wife?"

"Well, no, I can't say that I do. Nevertheless you might listen to what I have to say, and if it strikes you as possessing any value, you can then prove its authenticity and my identity."

"Very well; proceed."

"In the first place," said the lame man, gracefully twirling his guard-chain, "Florence Dingley never discovered until a few months ago

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

that her father was a participant in the fraud that had been imposed upon her."

"Curse him ! It is well for him that he has kept his lying throat out of reach of my hands."

"Doubtless it is—very well."

Hinton smiled strangely, and furtively loosened his cravat.

"But to do old Jacob full justice. He was paid handsomely by your mother for the rôle he played. Of course you know that he was only your wife's stepfather ?"

"A belated but most welcome piece of information."

"Yes. Dingley was not his real name, nor was he born in the gutter. He simply tumbled into it, as many a better man has tumbled before him. He was a brother of the Mrs. Robertson whose house I occupy with my friend Cuthbert. And when he found himself travelling gutterwards so very rapidly that he could not hope to keep a roof over his head, or bread in his mouth, he came South to see if his only sister, a wealthy woman, would not befriend the stepdaughter whom he really was fond of—"

Here Richard interrupted him fiercely:

"Curse Dingley ! What do I care about him or his story ?"

"*Per se* nothing whatever, my dear sir. But

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Dingley's story is so interwoven with your wife's that you had best listen to it intelligently. Where was I ? ”

“ He came South to get his sister to help him.”

“ Precisely. Thank you. Well, she would not consent to give him so much as the price of a loaf of bread unless he would agree to abjure the name that had once been hers—Hinton,—conceal his relationship to her, and adopt some nominal means of self-support. So I took up tinkering and adopted my dear—”

“ You took up tinkering ? ”

Richard sprang forward with a menacing gesture. Hinton warded off his approach with a laugh:

“ What a stupid blunder ! There, there, my dear boy, restrain your natural inclination to throttle me, until I have told you what you want to hear about Florrie. Everything is going to work together for good, and my death would only deprive you of an interesting recital.”

“ For once the truth has found its way over your lying lips. You are my only source of information. So go on.”

“ Thanks. Well, to eliminate the parts you already know. Jake and his little stepdaughter got along pretty well and lovingly, until a gay

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

wooer intervened. You know, of course, that your mother paid me to abscond with the girl. Florence only consented to go with me after I had convinced her that you had voluntarily abandoned her. Then I could not get away fast enough to suit her.

"I must say frankly that Madam Leighton is a princely paymaster. Even when I made little extra calls on her, the money was always forthcoming. On the means so lavishly supplied by her I returned to my Chicago home and turned gentleman once more. Nothing contributes more liberally to a man's desire for respectability than a bank-account. It really proved restoration in my case. I owe your mother an immense debt of gratitude."

"You accursed egotist, can't you leave yourself in the background for half a minute?"

"Certainly, certainly. Naturally you want to hear more about Florrie. Well, I did the square thing by my stepdaughter. I gave her every educational advantage, and had her superb voice cultivated. She has developed into a stunning beauty." Here the lame man stopped long enough to extract a card from his pocketbook. "There is her latest photo—doesn't flatter her in the least. Isn't that a wife to be proud of?"

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Richard seized the picture with trembling hands, and, with his eyes riveted upon the lovely face of the girl-wife he had been seeking up and down in the land for four years, said hoarsely:

"Go on."

"Well, it does seem that when a man once starts towards the winner's stand, everything contributes to help him up and onward. The old story, you know: to him that hath shall be given. My sister considerably died, about a year after we left Ponola, and bequeathed me a pretty satisfactory annual income.

"The bulk of her property, however, she left to Florrie; and the house in Ponola was also to be hers, provided she and her husband, Richard Leighton, came together within the course of five years. If they did not, the house, with all its handsome old furniture, plate, pictures, etc., was to become a Methodist parsonage for all time to come.

"I was several years weighing this matter in the balance. Should I admit the truth to Florrie, and tell her that I had lied in saying you had abandoned her? Or should I let some whining, sniggling parson come in for all the old house contained? You see, we had reached a stage of prosperity that made me somewhat independent of the house; but as time went on, I concluded

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

to risk Florrie's wrath rather than let the Ponola property slip through our fingers."

"You infernal villain!"

"It really sounds uglier in the telling than it appeared at the time. At all events, I made a clean breast of it—"

"And she?" Richard asked, breathing excitedly.

"By Jove, sir, she rose in her wrath and ordered me from her sight—told me never to come into her presence again until I had found you and made as clean a confession to you as I had to her. She fairly withered me with her scorching denunciation. She looked like a young empress—Florrie has a devil of a temper."

Leighton leaned across the small table that divided them, until his burning eyes almost scorched Hinton:

"If you were not an old man, and a helpless one, I would throttle you where you sit."

"Which would be manifestly unjust," said Hinton composedly, "seeing that that poor tipsy tinker, with not a dollar to his name, was simply bought up by your own aristocratic mother."

Richard fell back in his chair with a groan.

"Give me my wife's address," he said presently, "and—wipe out the rest."

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

"I telegraphed her to join me here."

"And her answer?"

"Was that I knew, before I left her, the only terms on which she would ever return to this spot. Her husband must come to fetch her, and his mother must solicit her, as a daughter-in-law, to visit Frogneck."

"Spoken like a true woman! Words worthy of my wife."

Richard sprang to his feet, his face all aglow with this sudden sunburst of unexpected happiness.

"Her husband will go and fetch her. His mother shall solicit her daughter-in-law's coming. The address, old man, quickly."

Hinton gave it to him, and he flung himself impetuously from the room.

"I guess my part of this job is about complete," said Hinton, slowly adjusting his crutches to his armpits, "and the old Robertson house will stay in the family."

By the time he had made his slow progress back to the carriage waiting for him in the quarter-yard, Richard Leighton was closeted with his mother.

XX

CONTAINS THE STORY OF A TEA-GOWN AND A HAPPY WOOING

MISS RITTENHOUSE, after a period of time she could not compute, opened her eyes on a quiet picture of feminine activity which she found entirely incomprehensible but distinctly soothing.

She had a vague idea that she had been ill quite a long time; that her illness had been a delightfully luxurious period of irresponsibility; that she had been an object of tender solicitude to friends whom her darkened brain refused to name; and that she had felt life gliding away from her as a tale that had reached its *finis*, or a strain of music from which distance had eliminated all that was discordant.

Even now, although she had wakened from slumber with a conscious clearing away of the fogs that had enwrapped her brain, she did not feel called on to make any mental effort to grasp the meaning of the pretty tableau which had for

A HAPPY WOOING

its setting the commonplace furnishings of Mrs. Dale's best company room.

Of course she recognized the different figures in the tableau. There were little Miss Schultz, the young person who used to sew for Madam Dangerfield Leighton, Amy Hinton, and Rebecca Leighton. They were clustered about a table drawn close to the sofa on which she had sat when making her confession to Leslie Cuthbert. How long ago had that been? She could not recollect.

The table and the sofa and three pairs of busy hands were full to overflowing with something white and soft and shimmering. It had almost a bridal effect, and the three faces at which the sick woman looked wore placidly happy expressions.

It must all be a part of the conflicting dreams that had puzzled her tired brain for days and nights. She would close her eyes again, and doubtless when she opened them once more the tableau would have vanished. She would be sorry, for she liked to look at it. Her waxen lids drooped heavily, a pathetic sigh fluttered over her pale lips, and, all unconsciously to herself, she moaned audibly:

"The night is so long and the way so dark; will I ever get there?"

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Then slumber, long, sweet, and healing, locked her senses once more.

Miss Schultz, Amy, and Rebecca suspended operations long enough for Becky to tiptoe to the bedside and back again.

"Poor dear," she said pitifully, "she must have been dreaming of that dreadful walk from Frogneck into Ponola. I am certain I should have died of fright on the road."

"Then you are not Ted's sister," said Amy, with a pretty proprietary enunciation of the name whose owner had managed to bring matters to a crisis with wonderful celerity after the clearing up of the Bartlett mystery. "I don't believe Ted would flinch from a cannon-ball."

Becky laughed with gay scepticism, and turned to Miss Schultz:

"Well, Mamie, what next?"

"There's all that flouncing to be hemmed."

Between the three of them, they had managed to scatter the *dissecta membra* of a white cashmere tea-gown over every available inch of space.

Amy, having autocratically claimed all the "easy parts," was frivolously occupied trying the effect of a pale blue satin bow against a neck jabot of fine valenciennes lace.

"She will look like a Saint Cecilia when she

A HAPPY WOOING

gets this gown on, and we will all have to perform the kow-tow before her."

"If she ever wears it at all, poor dear," said Becky in a melancholy whisper. "She hardly looks as if she had strength enough left to lift an eyelid."

Amy flung a scornful look at her.

"Oh, you Leightons! You are so frightfully unhopeful. It is time some one of you should be marrying a frivolous simpleton like myself. Frogneck needs an infusion of absurdity. I don't know how you and Cuthbert will manage to divide the lights and shadows between you."

Feeling sorry for "her Miss Rebecca," who blushed furiously under this merciless fire, little Miss Schultz attempted a diversion. Her utterance was somewhat impeded by the number of pins in her mouth, but "that gown mustn't stop."

"I thought the doctors said when she waked up this time she would be all right and we might let her talk a little."

"So they did; and when she does wake up I am going to tell her," said Becky, glancing towards the bed.

"No, I am," said Amy. "You see, I'm responsible for it all. And I don't want her to go on hating me to the end of the chapter."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"I think it all ought to be left to him," said Miss Schultz, freeing her mouth of pins to make her opinion more distinctly emphatic. "If you dear young ladies will let me make so bold—and really, since you've done me the honor to consult me about both your trousseaux, I feel quite mixed up in the Leighton affair—we're not called on, or you are not—begging you to excuse that 'we'—to tell her anything more than that she's been down with typhoid fever for twenty-two days; that the black serge dress she wore here wasn't really fit for an invalid's wear, so we had presumed to get a tea-gown ready for her by the time she was prepared to see Mr. Oscar, who had a little matter of business to talk over with her."

A startled sigh, a rustle of muslin, and Olivia's voice, weak but clear as a bell, reached them:

"With me? I am well enough now."

All three of the seamstresses started guiltily. Then Amy and Becky ran impetuously towards the bed. Olivia put out two wan little hands in greeting.

"Oh, my dear ones! Must I come back to life with an apology on my lips? I must have been hovering between sleeping and waking for the last hour. I saw you, but did not under-

A HAPPY WOOING

stand. I heard you, and I've been lying here slowly piecing things together."

"We've been piecing things together, too," said Amy, nodding her bright little head cheerily, "and we've pieced together the loveliest tea-gown! I am simply dying to see you in it."

Olivia smiled, but tears were shining in her eyes.

"How good of you two dear girls to take any interest in me! I wanted to see you once more before I left."

"Interest in you! Why, my dear, you are the magnet about which the entire concern revolves. As for Becky here—"

But Becky was not "here." She had slipped quietly away after assuring herself positively that Olivia's mind was as free from fog as her body was from fever, and gone in search of Oscar.

She had not far to go. He was sitting in the reading-room of the Traveller's Rest, awaiting the shriek of the locomotive that should announce the arrival of Ponola's one daily train.

Richard Leighton and his wife were expected in on her, and Oscar was there to receive them and send them on to Frogneck.

Becky gave her good news with sparkling

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

eyes. Oscar received it without any outward display of agitation or interest. He asked calmly:

"Does she know that I wish to see her as soon as her physician gives his consent, her own of course being first secured?"

"Yes; that is, I believe she does."

"Then you will please let me know. You are going to the train with me, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mr. Cuthbert wants me to. He and Florence have always been such good friends. Oscar"—she locked her hands about his arm as they stood together in the window—"I want you to be as happy as I am. It is so easy to forget when one is happy. You have forgiven me, I know; but I want you to forget my monstrous injustice. My precious noble brother!"

"I have forgiven you, child. You must not ask anything more of me—just yet." He smiled down upon her, but he looked infinitely weary. "See, there goes Merwick up to her room. If he gives me permission, I shall call upon Miss Rittenhouse immediately after he leaves."

And Becky stole back up-stairs to tell Amy and Miss Schultz that if they did not rush that tea-gown through, Olivia would certainly have to receive Oscar in that old black serge.

A HAPPY WOOING

Perhaps Dr. Merwick was in collusion with the tea-gowners, for when he came back downstairs he informed Mr. Oscar Leighton imperatively that "while his patient showed a marvelous improvement, he should prefer her not seeing him until the next day."

"If you don't say she looks like an angel," said Amy, who was the happy bearer, the next morning, of "Miss Rittenhouse's compliments to Mr. Leighton and she would be glad to have him come up," "I'll make Teddy do something dreadful to you, if he can think up anything more dreadful than giving you me for a sister-in-law. There, go along with you !"

If he did not say it, he certainly thought it, as he advanced almost reverently towards the little sofa on which Olivia was seated, looking etherealized almost beyond recognition by her long sickness and the soft white draperies which enveloped her.

"It was good of you to come to me," she said, half-rising to meet him, and lifting a timid glance to his sad stern face. "I wanted to see you once more."

He took her extended hands. They were cold and trembling. He gently replaced her on the sofa, and drew a chair up in front of her.

"You are still very weak, and you are not to

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

exert yourself. Merwick will hold me accountable in case of a relapse."

"But there is so much that I want to tell you—that I must tell you before I go away."

"There is absolutely nothing for you to tell me. I know it all."

She dropped her gaze upon her folded hands. She could not look him in the face "now that he knew."

"Then you have seen Mr. Cuthbert," she said in a stifled voice.

"I have seen Mr. Cuthbert innumerable times since you left Frogneck. We are good friends. He is a manly fellow, and I have given him my cordial consent to marry Becky."

A look of interest came into her sad face.

"Things have been progressing since I have been lying here hovering between life and death."

"Thank God, you have gained the victory. But, to come back to the matter nearest both our hearts, Cuthbert had nothing to tell me."

She lifted startled eyes to his face. A wave of bitter disappointment surged over her tired soul. Had it been left for her, then, to tell that ghastly story twice over?

"I had hoped," she said faintly, "to be spared this—"

A HAPPY WOOING

"Spared what?"

"The task of telling *you* that wretched story."

"Let me be the one to spare you," he said; and in answer to her look of utter bewilderment he went on rapidly: "Let me give you my version of that wretched story.

"You will remember—none of us can ever forget it—the fierce storm that raged on the night of Mr. Bartlett's visit to Frogneck. My brother Richard selected that same evening to pay one of his erratic visits home in search of money. Unfortunately, he discovered his old horse in the stables, and mounting it—merely for a short gallop, I presume, for he knew Black Prince was no longer our property—rode it away before daybreak.

"When I was making my usual rounds of the place before breakfast the next morning, Nathan informed me of the disappearance of the horse, and of his suspicions that Richard had gone for a gallop on him, and doubtless had turned him loose in the fields to find his own way back to the stables.

"I immediately mounted to the turret chamber with my field-glass, and turned it on the road to see if I could locate the horse without sending searchers in various directions. As fate would have it, I turned my powerful glass on the

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Althea bridge at the moment when you and—Mr. Bartlett met on it and stopped, in evident recognition.”

Leighton paused in his narrative. She was leaning towards him, with her tightly clasped hands clinched about the smart ribbon waist sash which Amy herself had tied in a most effective bow-knot. Her strained gaze was so full of pain that he faltered in his purpose.

“You are not strong enough for this yet,” he said very gently.

“Go on—go on. I shall never be stronger until I know—everything !”

“As you will. In my first shock of surprise the field-glass fell from my hand. I fiercely jumped to the conclusion that Bartlett had made a feint of business with me to meet you at Frogneck. That meeting on the bridge assumed the proportions of a premeditated interview. I had been deceived—in you; duped by him.

“My reflections were not pleasant. But I did not propose to blink matters. I readjusted my fallen field-glass—one of the old telescope pattern—and turned it on the bridge again at a supreme moment. Bartlett had fallen to his death. You were bending over the bridge in a trance of horrified inaction before you fled.

A HAPPY WOOING

"I waited only for you to reach the house—I heard you lock yourself in as I rushed down the steps. Then I went in search of *him*. I took Nathan with me. He assisted me in the search, in the finding, and in the interment of the unfortunate man.

"The swollen creek had carried him a mile or two beyond the bridge; his progress had been stopped by an accumulation of brushwood. It was evident that he had struck his head against one of the stone supports of the bridge in falling. Any doubts which I had clung to concerning you were dissipated by finding your picture in his watch.

"You will remember I went almost immediately to New Orleans after that event. From there I expressed the watch and all the papers found on the body to Mr. Bartlett's Chicago office, as indicated by the address in his memorandum-book. I also wrote a letter to his office clerk, stating that Mr. Bartlett had been accidentally drowned on my premises.

"Cuthbert is of the opinion that the suppression of that letter was the work of the clerk, who, being his—Cuthbert's—personal enemy, was willing to foster his uncle's monstrous suspicions of him."

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"Then you and Mr. Cuthbert have discussed this—this matter?"

"In all its bearings. I simply told you he had nothing to tell me. I had known it all these months."

"And all these months had—been—loathing me."

She shuddered at the torturing thought.

"And all these months had been pitying you. I knew that you were carrying a load that was crushing you to the earth, and—I could not help you bear it. You were so frail, and yet so strong."

There were unshed tears trembling on her lashes when she lifted an earnest gaze to his face.

"Mr. Leighton, there is one question I *must* ask."

"Well?"

"Why did you throw a veil of such dangerous secrecy about this matter? Why did you not inform the local authorities, invite investigation—and—let me take my chances? It would have spared you—all of us—so much."

"With the present light upon the subject I might ask myself the same question. But, bear in mind, I could not say it was an accident."

A HAPPY WOOING

For—I have not yet told you—clasped in his hand I found an open knife—”

She started violently:

“ And it was blood-stained ! I always carried it with me in my walks, to bring back ferns and flower-roots. I had cut my hand with it that morning. I was binding it up as I walked. That was why I did not see him soon enough to avoid him. It was fastened to my waist by a steel chain. I remember now that, as he reeled backward, he grasped it, that is all.”

“ But the explanation was not at hand *then*.”

“ All the more reason why you should have denounced that woman, and closed your doors upon her.”

“ Do not revive all that I have suffered, simply to reproach me for not acting with more cold-blooded circumspection. You have advanced no arguments for or against my course that have not battered their way through my storm-tossed brain. ‘ Denounce that woman ’ ? I could not.”

“ Could not ? ”

His voice sank to a low rich monotone:

“ No; because—I loved her.”

“ Loved—her ! ”

“ Love her. A change of tense cannot alter an unalterable fact.”

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

Olivia lifted her two trembling hands and buried her face in them. Convulsive sobs shook her enfeebled frame. Oscar dropped on his knees by her sofa in consternation. He had never loved any other woman. In all his self-sacrificing life he had never found time for dalliance, or for cultivating the parlor graces. Such as he was, he yearned over this fragile long-suffering woman with an infinite tenderness.

He cast about in his bewildered brain for some lover's phrase that would quell the storm he had unwittingly raised. None came at his bidding. He must be himself, must soothe her in his own fashion. He took forcible possession of her trembling hands, and while he held them both in one of his, he tenderly lifted her drooping head by placing the other one under her chin.

It took him a silent moment to master his own emotion:

"Olivia—Miss Rittenhouse—if what I have said angers or pains you, please wipe it out from your memory, as I shall from mine. I know there has been nothing of a lover's purpose visible under my harsh exterior, but bear in mind that my love was exposed to the fierce test of an ugly mystery. Surely to be loved by a man who has not frittered his affections away upon any other woman can work you no harm. While

A HAPPY WOOING

you have been lying here ill, since Cuthbert's revelation restored you to me for the true good woman I had at first thought you, my love has welled up from a very patient heart in a stream so pure and strong that I have panted for the moment to come in which I could abase myself before you, beg your pardon for ever having believed you capable of evil-doing, and pour out all my loving wishes.

"The moment has come, and I have abased myself. I kneel to you to ask your pardon for my suspicions, and for daring to love you, if need be. I am clumsy at wooing, but every tear you are shedding falls on my heart and scalds it. I would not add to the sorrows you have already borne for the boon of a world."

She laid a soft hand upon his lips:

"Oh, stop, stop, you break my heart ! Can you not see—can you not understand that—I weep for very excess of happiness ? Oh, my love, my noble wooer ! am I so good at dissembling that you have never suspected, never seen—"

Her head drooped until it rested on his shoulder. He dropped her hands to encircle her waist. His lips were near her cheeks; he mastered his desire to bring them nearer:

"Have I never suspected, never seen ?"

FORTUNE'S TANGLED SKEIN

"That I love you, that I cling to you as the one human being who can make life worth living. Oh, how sweet life has suddenly grown!"

And in the fulness of his content, he found no more questions to ask. Life had suddenly grown very sweet for him, too.

It was in the Robertson house that the great reception was held which Ponola has never worn threadbare as a topic.

"Four Mrs. Leightons—even old Madam Leighton, beaming as if she was responsible for everybody's happiness. But the most superb woman in all that surging, laughing, wondering crowd was Mrs. Oscar."

"Mrs. Dick Leighton," the charming giver of the great reception, had her partisans among those who adored the petite and the blonde, but on the whole Olivia, with her gentle manner, her graceful carriage, and her chastened expression, was the favorite.

THE END.





